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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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Virginia Whitaker

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **THOMAS WALSH**

TITLE: ***Always Open and Shut***

TYPE: Detective Suspense Story

DETECTIVES: Tim Ferguson and Willie Klein

COMMENTS: *Ferguson was sure his partner hated his guts. Then one night the two cops in radio-car 153 had to face more than just a bum sleeping in a yard or a boy breaking a store window . . .*

NOON . . . IT WAS A FINE SPRING day. Even in the tiny park square, cut off sharply on all four sides by tall office buildings and glittering streams of two-way traffic, you could feel this spring, you could almost touch it in the air. You could hear it in the cries of the children who were everywhere—leggy ones roller-skating on ribbons of winding concrete, small ones toddling on the grass, smallest ones of all big-eyed and solemnly crowing in their carriages. There was just one bench set apart from the others—at the end of the walk, in a small open space of grass and sunshine. That was taken too. Three men sat on it.

They were young men. Two of them were smoking cigarettes, and the third had a blade of grass between his thumbs. By placing it lengthwise across his lips and blowing on it he produced an odd sound —half whine, half whistle. A little boy in blue-and-white rompers, barekneed, stopped to listen to it, and the man on the end of the bench ceased talking. The one with the bit of grass threw it away. He said, "Come on, kid. Scram."

The little boy stared at him and at the grass, then went away slowly looking back over his shoulder. When they were alone again, the man on the end of the bench leaned forward, his hands clasped between his knees. He was a thin man in a light brown suit, with a wisp of blond mustache on his upper lip, and long blond sideburns on either side of his thin face.

"It's a push-over," he said. "I know it's a push-over, Mart, because I spent a week casing it. Eight, ten, twelve grand maybe. He's been there

© 1939 by Thomas Walsh; originally titled "Stick-up"

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thirty years, saving every nickel he got his hands on. Four, five hundred a year say, easy. Easy, Mart. You see what that adds up to?"

The one in the blue suit seemed young enough to be in high school. He had a boy's good-looking round face, and cold brown eyes that narrowed to sparkling slits when he smiled. He smiled now.

"Sure," he said. "It's always a million when Finkle tells it. I guess we just walk in and this Frenchman tells us where it is. I guess he gets up and shows us where to look."

"I guess," the man in the brown suit said, "Mart couldn't figure no way to open him up. I guess that. Hell!"

His voice was sour and contemptuous. The good-looking boy flushed. The third man—the one called Mart—with a fresh blade of grass in his fingers, looked at Finkle and then at the boy. He was a short, solid man, with a square face and big square hands. Before he could say anything Finkle spoke quickly to him, with an obvious eagerness to please, to convince, in the hurried flow of his words:

"I'm telling you, Mart. Look. All last week I hang around his store from 9 to 3, and at night till he closes. And he never goes to the bank. Never. I'd have seen him, wouldn't I? Once a week, Saturday, the old woman takes the silver out and changes it into bills. But she don't deposit the bills, Mart; she takes them home with her. I was watching her all the time and I seen her do that. Everyone on the block knows the old Frenchman has no use for banks. He's always panning them. That's how I picked it up. And it's sweet, Mart—it's a spot. How we gonna miss?"

Mart's square face wrinkled itself up thoughtfully, undecided, around the mouth. He blew on a fresh blade of grass again, and then bit the end off. "The layout," he said. "How's that?"

Finkle took a deep breath. "Just like we planned it ourselves. Perfect. A little one-story dump on the corner of an alley. The old guy and his wife live in back of the store, and there's a door from the kitchen to the alley. There's our in. We crack in, say around 12, after they're asleep. The dough's there, right where he can watch it himself. I'm telling you it's—"

"Cops?" Mart said.

"Cops," Finkle repeated, his lips curving. "The flatfoot on the beat don't get around once in two hours. They got a radio car sliding around every so often, but if we work it right they don't see a thing. Why should they? The driver's a big guy named Ferguson. Tough Irish. Dumb. If we're smart there ain't gonna be a reason in the world for him to stop."

"Yeah," Mart said. "It's always open and shut—talking about it."

For a while he was silent, staring down at the walk through the wide loop his clasped arms made on his

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knees. A nursemaid went by, pushing a baby carriage; a fat woman with a chow dog followed her. Mart flipped the blade away and put his hands in his pockets, his feet straight out before him. He spoke, watching his shoes.

"I can handle the old guy," he said. "I can make him squawk. You better come in with me to take care of the wife, Finkle. Arthur parks the car where it's gonna be handy, and covers us from outside. Twelve's too early to crack in. Old guys like that take a long while to get to sleep. Say two."

He raised his head and looked directly into Arthur's eyes.

"You know what it means to cover us? You know what to do if the flatfoot noses around, or the squad car pulls up outside?"

Arthur smiled his cold boy's smile. He said, "How many guesses you give me?"

The square man's face had no trace of expression on it. "I heard guys talk like that before."

"I'm talking now," Arthur said.

"Okay," Mart grunted. "You're all right, kid. You'll do. You got the old moxie. But something goes wrong once in a while on a job like this, and you can't tell what it's likely to be beforehand. Maybe it won't be the picnic Finkle figures. If it ain't, you got to hold up your end."

Arthur's face was pinched in, sullen. "If you think I can't—"

Mart said, "I don't think nothing. I'm just telling you now what to do. Someone might see us go in, no matter how careful we are. If the coppers come, you got to hold 'em till we're out. You got to give it to them. Not in the legs, but where it hurts. Here," and he put his hand against his belt buckle.

The boy's eyes were flint-hard.

"I'll fix 'em," he said.

"Good," Mart said, putting a hand flat on his knee. "Two o'clock we'll take it. You pick up a car around midnight. Park a couple of blocks away and meet me and Finkle outside Haggi's. At one, after they close. Got that?"

A few minutes later they got up and went off.

Seven P.M.

Ferguson got up at 7 every night, and was shaved and showered and dressed in half an hour. He'd been on the night shift three years, so long a time that daytime sleeping had ceased to bother him. Now, his face lathered, standing before the mirror in his pajamas, he sniffed deeply at the sizzling smell of steak and the faint, peppery tang of fried potatoes that came from the kitchen door just across the short hall from him.

"With onions," Ferguson said, in deep satisfaction, grinning and winking at the reflection of his bony, freckled face in the mirror over the white sink. Ferguson could eat steak and fried potatoes with onions every night in the week; he'd often told Martha that she'd never have to

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bother thinking up menus for him. Maybe, Ferguson reflected, that was why she had married him.

"Was it that?" he growled, when Martha looked in at him through the doorway.

"Was it what, sir?" Martha asked. She was a slender girl with dark brown hair and pleasant eyes, and a way of wrinkling up her lips at him that Ferguson thought was the greatest thing in the world.

"I'm on to all your tricks," he boomed out, in the affected brogue he loved to use. "To all of them, me girl. Sure," he sang, "and I am, I am, I am. To all of them, indeed. To you"—he descended there, statuesquely posed, to deepest bass—"my girl, to you, who, who, who, whoooo."

Martha turned her head back to the kitchen. "It's all right, Edie," she said. "He hasn't lost his mind. He carries on like this all the time."

"Hey," yelled Ferguson, hastily closing his door. "Your sister there? Why didn't you tell me?"

He was ashamed of himself. "Hell," he muttered. It was all right to act that way with Martha; but Ferguson knew how other people would look at it. Baby talk and silliness—three short months ago before he'd married Martha he couldn't understand why a full-grown man would get so childish. Timothy Jerome Ferguson now—

Sighing, he went on with his shave. It took him longer than usual to get out to the kitchen, in the uniform pants and blue shirt and black tie he would wear till fall. But Martha was alone, by the stove, laughing at him, and his face cleared.

"Devil," he said, catching her at the other side of the table. "The slyness of you, alone all the time; who'd be on to your tricks?" Growling, he lowered his head and rubbed his cheek against hers, hard.

"You're shaved now," Martha said. "so that's all right. It's even nice. If I hadn't pretended Edie was here you'd have had the people upstairs tramping on the floor by now."

"Tramping!" Ferguson bellowed. "Tramping! At my voice, you mean, when Willie Klein and me—" He stopped there; his eyes darkened. "Willie Klein," he muttered. "Willie Klein! That Dutchman."

"If you don't let me go this minute," Martha told him, "the steak will be burned to a crisp. And why is Willie Klein a Dutchman in that tone of voice? Are the little boys still glowering at each other?"

Sitting down, Ferguson rubbed the side of his jaw reminiscently. "One guy," he growled, "just one guy in this world ever got away with socking me. And maybe he ain't got away with it altogether, either. Sometime—"

"My lord!" Martha looked at him, shaking her head. "It's still that? And it was your own fault. If you'd let me tell him, the way I wanted to—"

"Why shouldn't I have told him?"

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Ferguson demanded loudly, pushing himself away from the table by straightening his arms on its edges. "Had I a thing to be ashamed of? Anybody but Willie Klein would have listened to reason. But not him," Ferguson said bitterly. "Not that Dutchman. He'd known you first, so you were all safe and sound with a fence around you marked, *Private, Willie Klein—Hands Off!* Wasn't the decent thing to tell him as soon as we found out ourselves how we felt? Wasn't it?"

Martha sighed. "But it's so long ago now. It's—it's silly. And he never cared for me, not really. But you had to go and tell him at the dance, out of a clear sky. It was the shock more than anything else that made him hit you. I suppose he thought we'd made a fool of him before everybody. If you'd left it to me—"

Ferguson rubbed his jaw again. He said darkly, "That's not finished, either. Mark my words. If they hadn't held me after it I'd have torn the head off his shoulders." Muttering, he attacked his steak. Over a first mouthful he pointed the fork at Martha and added, "Me, mind you. The best friend that Dutchman ever had!"

After the meal was done, and the dishes, he picked up his cap from the top of the icebox and looked at the clock—for on Tuesday night he left early to get in his weekly pistol practice. He was still muttering about Willie Klein.

"He'll come to me on his knees before I'll listen," he told Martha. "And maybe not even then, baby. We sit in that car eight hours a night, side by side, and he acts like I'm not within a mile of him. He hates my guts, baby. Sometimes I think—" He stopped, scowling. Then he said, "Night, baby. See a show," and bounced down the steps on his long legs.

Inside the living room—the shiny, new, three-months-old living room that was so quiet when he had gone, so still that it became sometimes a little frightening—Martha looked at her watch. Eight ten; there was still plenty of time for the last show, the one letting out at eleven thirty. And that was just when she wanted to get out, because then she always got home just at 12, when Tim and Willie Klein were going out for their tour in the car.

She wouldn't, Martha thought, listen to the police calls on the radio for more than an hour tonight. She wouldn't be silly. In three months she had learned a lot from listening to that quiet voice breaking suddenly, now and again, out of its humming cocoon of sound; she had learned that it was silly to be frightened, and that always, no matter how you felt, whatever premonitions you had, it was never more than a drunk or a cringing sneak thief or a domestic squabble, that car 153 had to look over. Now, moving around briskly, folding up his evening paper again, picking up his pipe, rescuing a tie from the back of the couch

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with a disapproving click of her lips, she knew all that; but it was odd how, in the silent room, the voice she knew now as well as she knew her own—the distinct, detached, careful and never excited voice—was so plain in her ears.

A drunk, Martha thought, or a bum sleeping in a yard or a boy breaking a window. That was all it would be. Nothing more—never, never anything more!—for Tim and Willie Klein, for car 153.

Nine P. M.

When Willie Klein awoke he lay quiet for a time listening to the sounds in the street, to the squawky humming of a tin-box radio in the room next door. It was Tuesday, Willie Klein remembered, and that meant there would be meat loaf downstairs, boiled potatoes, watery coffee, rice pudding swimming in weak milk. Wednesday or Saturday or Sunday, he knew what to expect then, too. He'd been in the boarding house six months now, and Mrs. Morrissey was a methodical woman.

So Willie Klein didn't hurry getting up; he didn't sing. He got downstairs about ten, and the tray was on top of the kitchen stove waiting for him. The fire had long gone out, and the meat loaf was cold, the gravy congealed. He went out after a few mouthfuls, in his civilian clothes; at the corner saloon he had a couple of beers and a liverwurst sandwich. Then he began thinking about Tim Ferguson.

It wasn't an effort; it wasn't something he wanted to do. It just came, as he knew it would come, without any fuss, slowly and inevitably. He didn't think of her at all; he never thought of her. Nights now Tim Ferguson was always alone in his mind, as if there were room for nothing else with him there. The sequence of thoughts began and ran on like a record set in place in his mind; and as it started he knew how each bit was fitted in, how long it ran, and what broke it off to the next. First, there'd be Tim Ferguson and the things they'd done, the times they'd had together, and the talks they'd had and the friends they'd been—Tim Ferguson, the traitor.

The fact of that betrayal was too clearly defined in his mind to admit any argument. It hung together; every bit fitted in; and no matter how many times Willie Klein went over it in his mind there were never any loopholes.

She hadn't liked him, not the way he'd wanted. Well, Willie Klein could have taken that. He could lose, all right, and he could get over that loss. Willie Klein had known where he stood with her, and from the first he had not hoped very much; for he was old enough to know that those things seemed set in some sardonic fashion that a man could not change, however he tried.

Long before he'd introduced her to Tim Ferguson he'd known that. That was the night Tim Ferguson went out with them to a party,

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bringing a girl of his own, dancing once or twice with Martha, joking with her. Tim Ferguson, his best friend. . . . Swell, Tim Ferguson had told him, when they met the next day. She's a swell girl. After that they had gone out two or three times a week, he and Martha, Tim Ferguson and one or another of his girls. And then, at a party a month later, Tim had come up to Willie Klein with a queer look on his face. He was sorry, Tim Ferguson said, and he didn't know how Willie Klein would feel about it; but he and Martha—well, they liked each other. They were going to get married. And he'd wanted Willie Klein to know about it right away.

Willie Klein wouldn't believe it at first. He thought it was a joke.

"Oh, yeah?" he said.

And then he saw by the other man's face that it wasn't a joke; it was true.

"You see how it is, Willie?" Tim Ferguson said, standing before him. "We wanted you—"

"Sure," Willie Klein said tightly. "Sure, I see."

He was not conscious of throwing the blow, or landing it; but in a moment Tim Ferguson was sprawled out on the floor at his feet, and a couple of men were holding Willie, and some more jumped on Tim Ferguson as he scrambled, raging, to hands and knees. They were forced away from each other; they were talked to and taken home in different groups. And they met the next night, in the squad car, but they hadn't spoken. They'd never spoken to each other since.

Eleven thirty P. M.

Old Boucher closed the shop every night at the same time, just as soon as the last straggling group from the theater up the street went by. There was no more business to hope for then; and in the kitchen behind the store Emilie would have finished with the fudge, and the rich brown caramels and gleaming black chocolate drops would be set out in little squares on white paper to cool and harden. When the clock above the counter tinkled once, Old Boucher closed the glass cases, wiped the crumbs away from the wrapping shelf, and swept the floor. After that he saw that the outer doors were shut, dropped the bar in place, and turned out the light.

He had no cash register, except the wooden drawer under the counter, which served as well. He pulled it out and emptied it into the four little canvas bags from the closet—one for pennies, always the heaviest, one for nickels, one for dimes, one for quarters. It was an event when Old Boucher had to change a dollar. He would always turn it over in his hands and peer at it carefully, then hold it a moment as if he were not quite sure what to do with it. Children were Old Boucher's best customers; and children rarely had dollars.

Tonight, after the lights were out,

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the coins collected, the door locked, Old Boucher went back into the kitchen, the small canvas bags under his arm. Emilie was at the sink, not quite done with her scouring; but on the table the cup of hot cocoa was waiting for him, and after he had put the bags high up in the cupboard, behind two little jars where they would not easily be seen, Old Boucher sat down to the hot cocoa gratefully.

There was a creaking in his bones these nights, a stiffness in all his joints that called for due care whenever he wished to move.

That might be due to the fact that he was growing old. He did not know. Sometime, perhaps soon now, he and Emilie would be going back to France; for when a man was old, when he had worked and saved, there should be a time to enjoy things, to see again the country and the friends of one's youth. If, Old Boucher reflected sadly, there were any of them left. There would be a little money—enough for them. Even pennies, in 30 years, mount up.

"Eh, old woman," he said, yawning when the cocoa was finished, "time has passed. We are not young. It is a sad thing to think of that."

"Then it is a good thing," Emilie said, "to think of bed. And of our plans. In the drawer there are folders, new ones. You will see for how little we could go back, in a boat—"

Always, Old Boucher thought illtemperedly, she was at him now to go back. Always!

Grumbling, he went into the bedroom, past the little closet on the left of the hall, where behind the boards there was a hollow space. Old Boucher tried the door to make sure it was locked, and reflected comfortably that the space was not so hollow as it had been thirty years before. It was a safe place there—safe from thieves, and the smooth, plump men in the banks he had never trusted. Who would think to look there? Who could know? Old Boucher, pulling off his boots, esteemed himself a shrewd man.

The clock in the store tinkled faintly twelve times. Undressed then, he got creakily into bed, turned over, sighed, wrinkled up his white mustache comfortably against the pillow, and settled himself for sleep. Drowsily he thought that Emilie might be right. Soon now—

Tim Ferguson was getting into a car—a small black coupé waiting for him outside the precinct house. On the far side, looking expressionlessly past him, Willie Klein was already in his place. They rolled up to the corner, and turned left—two men in a moving prison four feet across, stolid-eyed, silent, hating each other. Some night, Tim Ferguson thought fretfully, he was going to bust that Dutchman's jaw. But the emotion in Willie Klein was deeper, more solid, coiled like a spring. It did not make him fretful; he was not impatient. There was an ugly pleasure just in feeling it there, in his

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body and his throat, in the sullen beat at his temples. Some night, he thought; soon now—

Arthur was just getting into a car, in a parking lot out on the Boulevard, behind a dine-and-dance place that would not close till three. They'd be through then, the car abandoned somewhere—perhaps before it was missed. Nobody bothered him; the keys were in the lock. When he turned the wheel, backing, the gun in his pocket pressed into him solidly. Arthur liked to feel it. He told himself that if Mart worried about him he was crazy. Three grand! Florida maybe, or California —wherever he wanted to go.

He squirmed around in the seat just to feel the hard shape of the gun against his back once more. Three grand apiece—maybe more, if Finkle wasn't lying. Right in his hands, waiting for him. Soon now—

Martha was getting home from the movies. It was late but she wasn't sleepy, and she decided that she'd listen for a little while—an hour. No later than one. No more. Sometimes they didn't call him all night. She settled herself on the couch with a book and a glass of milk. The radio hummed and crackled; but there were no calls. Silly, Martha thought. He's all right; he's fine. At eight in the morning he'd be off. Soon now—

One forty-five A. M.

"Okay," Mart said. His voice had altered since this morning; it was very quiet, very low, and harsh. "Slow now, kid. Anywhere along here. Cut your motor but leave the key in; that way you don't have to look for it coming back. Here. This is swell."

He got out first and faced up and down the empty street. Then with Finkle he walked down to the corner, lit a cigarette there, and looked around. After that, without coming back to the car, he crossed the street and walked up the other side. Arthur met them at the head of the alley.

They went in without speaking, making no sound at all. Halfway down, in the shadow of a backyard wall, Mart stopped. He told Arthur softly, "Stick here, kid. Keep quiet. If anything starts give them all you got. Keep your head, too. Don't shoot at cats. Give us ten minutes and we're through. All set?"

Arthur nodded. He was shaking slightly, but that was because the night was cold. The gun seemed to grip itself hard in his fingers as Mart's square face, pale in the darkness, watched him unwinkingly. A tough guy, Arthur thought; and then, with a cold arrogance, he saw that Mart was no tougher than he was himself. Three grand! This was his chance and he wasn't going to miss it. His lips set as he said, "Okay, Mart. Push off now. I'm ready."

All during the ride Finkle had cracked his skinny fingers without

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speaking; he didn't speak now, but Arthur could hear his quick breathing. They went silently away from him and became crouched, vague figures by the back door; and after a time the shadow grew greater there, darkened, and then lessened again. This time no figures were outside it. There was no cry, no alarm. They were in and everything was fine.

Arthur wondered how much they would get. He stood flat against the wall, ten feet left of the door, alone now, with the gun heavy in his hand and his arm tensed. Two empty streets, filtered dimly by lamplight, quiet, deserted, were all he could see when he turned his head from one end of the alley to the other. No people went by, no cars passed. Inside the house there was a faint cry, instantly smothered. The old lady, Arthur thought—the Frenchman's wife. It did not come again. No one heard it. Finkle must have shut her up.

Ten minutes more and it would be over. Mart could make the old man open up. And if Finkle wasn't lying, if the dough was there—

A car stopped in the street to his right. Arthur faced that way, rigidly, his breath held, his left hand down flat against the wall, and his right, with the gun in it, level across his chest. Somebody got out of the car. There were steps, the slam of a door. He heard no words. Clip-clip-clip-clip. It was somebody with hard heels, not being careful—somebody who was coming up to the alley, and coming in.

Pressing back against the wall, Arthur gained the kitchen door, and edged it in with his shoulder. "Mart!" he called, low. But there was no answer and no other chance to warn them; for the somebody was a big man who paused only momentarily at the head of the alley, then came on so quickly that there was only one thing left to do, the thing Mart had told him he'd have to do. Where it hurt—where it stopped them cold.

Arthur saw what he was by the glitter of light on his peaked cap, and who he was by his build and the way he walked. Ferguson. He wasn't afraid or nervous at all, as he had imagined he might be; his mouth drew down and he called Ferguson a name, softly and savagely. Three grand waiting for him, almost in his hands. And this—

Standing in the darkened doorway, jerking the gun up, he fired.

Willie Klein, sprawled out in the seat of the squad car ten feet from the alley, heard that shot. But two or three seconds went by before it established itself for what it was in his mind. Most nights, about two, Tim Ferguson pulled up somewhere for a smoke, and went to a doorway, or a near-by alley, for a cigarette. After he came back, Willie Klein would take his turn, silently, too. Tonight was no different from any other night; Willie Klein was just

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sitting there, waiting, when the shot came.

He was out on the sidewalk before he knew he had moved. His revolver was in his hand and he was running, and on the seat, where Tim Ferguson had a habit of laying it between them while they rode along, he had an instant's flash of the other gun. It wasn't Tim Ferguson, then, who had fired.

Then somebody snapped two shots at him as he reached the alley, so close that he felt the whine of them past his head. Willie Klein hit the pavement in a flat dive, rolled over, and got behind the corner of the house wall.

Quiet rolled back incredibly over the reverberating flat reports, over the beating of his heart and the quick, hard rush of his breathing. The alley was hidden completely from him on the nearest side. In the part that was open—a narrowing strip slanted out from the end of his wall to a point halfway down the alley—he could not see Tim Ferguson; he could not see anyone. But he knew that whoever had fired was inside the building, inside the dark, open splotch of the kitchen door; he, or they, had to be. The candy store in front, the rooms in back, all faced him now, all had windows only on the alley; he remembered a blank wall, doorless, on the yard side. They had to come out this way, Willie Klein knew, or not at all.

Somewhere along that alley was Tim Ferguson, dead or wounded, or all right, maybe, but without his gun. And they'd come out soon, they'd have to; four or five people would have called headquarters by now, and they'd know that, too. And when they did, with Tim Ferguson before them, they'd throw shots at him just to be safe, just to make sure he wasn't playing possum. That was the first thing they'd do.

In that first moment it was very clear to Willie Klein what his course of action should be; six months ago he'd never have hesitated. Even now, as he realized that, he got to his knees. He had to cover Tim Ferguson; he had to give him a chance by driving them back inside. He saw that and he knew what he had to do; but as his legs tensed under him a word added itself to it. Why?

The word stopped Willie Klein as short as if a chain had been flung around him. Why? What did he owe Tim Ferguson? Once, he would have done it—once when Tim Ferguson was a friend of his. Now—a funny look came into Willie Klein's eyes. Now, suppose he took his chance. Suppose he played it on his own. A score, a thing he'd been praying for— Wasn't this it?

There was another burst of shots —to cover them, he knew, to drive him back. They'd be coming now. And if they got Tim Ferguson how could he help that? Why should he be a fool? His own life—well, Willie Klein would hold on to that. Willie Klein wouldn't—

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Something stopped him there—a foot thrust out into his line of vision five yards from the kitchen door, a quiet foot, with Tim Ferguson's big shoe on the end of it. It didn't move at all; it was very still; it must have been there all the time, though Willie Klein hadn't noticed it before. As soon as he saw it, it built up a picture in his mind; it showed him Tim Ferguson very still too, the whole lean length of him pitched there, with his hands thrown out and his eyes open, unwinking, blank.

Willie Klein felt nothing then; he decided nothing. All right, he thought. So what? So why— Then he thought maybe they'll figure I'll hide here. Maybe they think I'll just play it safe. I'll let them kill him and—

He got up and charged forward a moment before they came plunging out of the kitchen door. There was no time for them to fire at Tim Ferguson, or even at him; they ran. They had ten yards on him in the alley, and only half that as they reached the car.

Glass smashed in the car windows from the gun Willie Klein remembered only then to use. The starter ground once, twice, a third time, before it caught. Willie Klein had only one more step to make then; he could see the driver, a wild-eyed kid with a face set in savage lines. Swinging the wheel around with his left hand, he was shooting at Willie Klein from the other. But it was too hasty firing from a crazy angle across his chest; he was watching the road, trying to get the car straightened out at the same time.

Willie Klein wasn't hit; he didn't stop. He knew that nothing now was going to stop him from reaching that kid. If they'd pulled up, the way they used to, the two of them together, sitting in the car, having their smoke, it wouldn't have happened. It was only because—

On the running board, smashing the gun down away from him, he spun the steering wheel around. They crashed sideways into a street lamp. Then they were out, three of them, and Willie Klein, jarred off to the gutter, had the kid by his legs, so tightly his hands ached. He was never going to let him go. As the kid came down on top of him a short, square-faced man grabbed the gun and swung it down, but Willie Klein paid no attention to that at all. Tim Ferguson and him—that was all right. That was the way it should be, the way it had to be.

The square-faced man took a long time firing; it seemed to Willie Klein that the shot would never come. Then the kid was quiet in his arms, and when he got up holding him as a shield he saw that the square-faced man was down, flat in the street, the gun ricocheting away from him on the stone. The third man was standing by the car with his hands up. "Hold it!" he was yelling in a panicky voice. "Hold it, Ferguson!"

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The odd thing was that Tim Ferguson was there, glowering. "You big damn' dumb Dutchman!" he was yelling at Willie Klein. "What were you trying to do—get yourself killed?"

Willie Klein, holding the kid by the collar, looked at him.

"Me?" he said hoarsely. "Me? I thought—"

"You thought," Tim Ferguson said savagely. "Maybe after he missed the first time I was going to hop up from behind those cans and give him another shot at me. Maybe I'm dumb enough to do that. Thickhead! What did you have to come bouncin' over me like a wild man for? Why didn't you stay where you were and pick them off as they came out?"

Willie Klein just looked at him. For a while he had to listen to an old man and an old woman yelling at him in what he vaguely thought was French. Old Boucher waved his arms under all their noses, dancing from the coldness of the street on his bare feet. He told them in France it was not like this. A man could live and have his sleep there, in peace, in safety, without murderers to wake one, to threaten one, to put a pillow on the poor wife's head. Emilie said, with a Spartan nod, she had known. Had she not told him? Tomorrow, she would see about the tickets. Tomorrow, in the morning. And if he did not want to come—

Very soon the wagon was there, to pick up the thin man and the square man and the kid. Then the old Frenchman took his wife's arm and went across the street still talking, stopping once more in the alley to shake his fist again at Officers Klein and Ferguson, who were standing awkwardly together by the smashed car.

Officer Ferguson, stiff, flushed, mumbled something about what the hell was the matter anyway, and why didn't he come up to the house sometime and see Martha, who was always asking for him. For a while Officer Klein stared at the busted fender and said nothing; he was wondering if perhaps a thing that was built up between two men for years was too tough to be smashed in a minute by words, by anything that happened. Martha! He tried to remember her and she was a dim figure. He could not recall the color of her eyes.

Martha was in bed, asleep. They hadn't called his number once for the two hours she had listened, and she was sure it was going to be a quiet night . . .

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **JEAN POTTS**

TITLE: ***The Withered Heart***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: South America

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *An ironic and touching story about "man's best friend" and the part he unconsciously played in a murder . . . by the author of* GO, LOVELY ROSE, *winner of MWA's "Edgar" as the best first mystery novel of 1954.*

AT THE SOUND OF THE CAR TURNING into the driveway, Voss was instantly, thoroughly, awake. Not even a split second of fuzziness. His mind clicked at once into precise, unhurried action, just as it had last night. He sat up on the edge of his bed — Myrtle's, of course, was empty — and reached for his watch. It was only a quarter to eight. Already? he thought, as the car stopped in the driveway. He had not expected anyone quite so soon. Not that it mattered; he was ready any time.

He waited for the next sound, which would be someone knocking on the screen door of the veranda. The bedroom seemed to wait too, breathlessly quiet, except for the whir of the electric fan, tirelessly churning up the sluggish air. The heat — the relentless South American heat — shoved in past the flimsy slats of the window blinds. Even now, in the early morning, there was no escape from its pounding glare. He ought to be used to it; he had been here long enough. More than ten years stagnating in this unspeakable climate, in this forsaken backwater where nothing ever happened except the heat . . .

There. Someone was knocking. In his pajama pants and scuffs, Voss shuffled out to the veranda. Frank Dallas — good old Frank — was waiting at the screen door, peering in through the swarming purple bougainvillea. He looked fresh and

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hearty. His white linen suit had not yet had time to wilt; his thinning hair still showed the marks of a damp comb.

"Rise and shine, you lazy bum! Top of the morning to you!"

Was there perhaps a hollow ring in Frank's voice? Voss could detect none. Nor any trace of trouble in Frank's open, beaming face. Relax, he told himself; it's too soon — he's come for some other reason.

"Hi. What's the idea, rousing the citizenry at this hour . . ." Yawning, Voss unhooked the screen door. "What the hell hour is it, anyway?"

"Quarter of eight. Time you were up. Look, Voss —" Frank lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper — "Myrtle's gone, isn't she?"

"Sure." He said it automatically, without hesitation. "She's gone up to her sister's for a couple of days. Left early, before six this morning."

"Yeah. She told me she was planning to. That's why I figured it was safe to stop by. I've got this letter that Enid wanted me to give you. She was all upset yesterday, poor kid, resigning the way she did. Well, it kind of threw me too. Anyway, this letter, I promised to see that you got it . . ."

Poor old Frank had never gotten over being nervous about his role as go-between. He was as jittery — and, Voss supposed, as secretly thrilled — today as he had been six months ago, when Voss and Enid started their clandestine affair. Happily married himself, Frank had the romantic, inquisitive disposition of a maiden aunt. Besides, as American consul, he was Enid's boss. Very natural, very convenient for him to get into the act. Fun for everybody. Great fun at first. Lately — well, it was over-simplification to say that Enid was too serious, too impetuous, too intense. Those were the very qualities in her that made this affair different from the others, that made Enid herself such an irresistible magnet to Voss. Only he couldn't respond to them any more. He did not want to be a philanderer; he wanted to be a true, star-crossed lover — and he had lost the power. It was as if Myrtle had withered his heart.

This envelope in his hand, addressed in Enid's headlong writing — her farewell note, or so she must have thought when she wrote it — even this could not penetrate his benumbed and crippled soul. To be losing, through his own inertia, a love like Enid's, and to feel nothing more than a kind of guilty weariness . . .

He had felt something more last night, all right. Sudden and vivid as lightning, Myrtle's face flashed into his mind. Alive with malice, as it had been last night — the vulgar, coarse, knowing face of his wife. "So your girl friend's leaving," she had said. "I hear she's resigned. My, my, I never thought you'd let this one get away . . ."

Gloating over her own handiwork — because it *was* her doing; the deadly years of being married to Myrtle had very nearly destroyed in

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him the capacity for feeling anything. Very nearly. But not quite; last night proved that. Hate was left. And if he could hate, he could also love. So Enid need not be lost, after all.

It was going to take time for the numbness to wear off. Voss was still stunned by the impact of release — which, considering everything, was really very fortunate. This morning, if ever in his life, he needed a mind uncluttered by emotion — a mind as cool and accurate as a machine.

"You're all right, aren't you, old man?" Frank was asking anxiously.

"I'll be all right." He paused, conscious of his own pathos as he placed Enid's letter, tenderly, on the wicker table. "It's just that — well, I guess you know how I feel about Enid."

"I know. It's rugged."

Frank was brimming with sympathy. It would be unkind — more than that, it would be indiscreet — to deny him the chance to spill over. "Have a cup of coffee with me," said Voss. "We'll have to make it ourselves. Myrtle always gives the maid time off when she's going to be away. I'd rather eat at the club than up here alone. The maid's a lousy cook, anyway, but we're lucky to get anybody to come this far out." Their house was set off by itself, on the outermost fringe of the American colony. What a break that had turned out to be, last night!

Voss felt a spasm of nervous excitement, rather like stage fright, as he led the way to the kitchen. Here was where it had happened, right here by the sink . . . Another break — the tiles had been a cinch to clean. But might there be some telltale sign?

There was none. Not the smallest. He breathed easy again.

Back on the veranda, with the coffee tray between them, Frank launched into earnest, incoherent speech. The way he looked at it, it was just one of those things. Not that it was any of his business. But look at it one way, and it was the best thing all around — for Enid to pull out, that is. She was really too young for Voss, so she'd get over it. And there was this much about it, a man just couldn't walk out on a wife like Myrtle, not if he had any conscience.

"No," agreed Voss with a wan smile. "I couldn't walk out on Myrtle." But not on account of his conscience, he added to himself. He thought about last night, probing for some tiny qualm, some flicker of remorse. There was none. This extraordinary lack of any kind of feeling . . .

"Myrtle's a good egg, too, you know." Frank took out his handkerchief and mopped his moist red brow. "I've always liked Myrtle."

Oh, sure! Myrtle was more fun than a barrel of monkeys. Everybody said so. The life of every party. Suddenly the memory of the endless chain of parties, monotonous, almost identical, pressed down on Voss like a physical weight. He used to sit and drink steadily, with every nerve stretched rigid in protest against Myrtle's raucous voice, against the

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flushed, blowzy looseness of her face. For some reason — maybe because it was her lushness and vivacity that had attracted him in the beginning — her antics had a kind of excruciating fascination for Voss. Your wife, he used to tell himself; look at her, listen to her — she's all yours.

"What I say is," Frank floundered on, "when two people have made a go of it like you and Myrtle for this many years, why, they can't just throw it away at the drop of a hat. Myrtle doesn't know, does she?"

Unprepared for this particular question, Voss hesitated. But it took him only a moment to see the danger in assuring Frank — as he would like to have done — that of course Myrtle did not know. Only a romantic innocent like Frank could imagine that the affair had been a secret; in all likelihood Myrtle herself had unloaded to everybody she knew. Much better to play it safe, just in case the question should arise later. "She probably suspects," he said slowly. "But I don't think she has any idea that it's serious. You know how it is in a place like this — flirtations going on all the time."

"Sure. I know," said Frank, very much the man of the world. "Well, one thing, with her away for a couple of days, you'll have a chance to kind of pull yourself together. She couldn't have picked a better time."

"She certainly couldn't," said Voss sincerely. As Frank stood up to leave, he added, once more conscious of his own pathos, "Many thanks for bringing me the letter, Frank. And for the moral support."

Things couldn't have gone more swimmingly, he was thinking. With his mind clicking away in this admirable, mechanical way, there was no reason why he shouldn't breeze through the rest of the morning without turning a hair. All it took was careful planning and a cool head. He had the cool head, all right. And — thanks to Myrtle — the withered heart that would nevertheless come back to life, all in good time.

It was at this self-congratulatory moment that Frank dropped his bomb. Casually; as an afterthought, a final pleasantry that occurred to him when he was halfway out to his car. "I suppose Myrtle took Pepper with her, didn't she?" he called back. "Of course. I never knew her to go half a block without that dog."

Voss himself remained intact. The world around him reeled, and then, with a stately, slow-motion effect, it shattered. Except for Frank, who still waited out there, smiling expectantly.

"Oh, yes." Voss's voice rang, remote and dreamy, in his own ears. "Of course she took Pepper. Myrtle never goes anywhere without Pepper."

"In his traveling case, I suppose? Only dog in the country with his own specially built traveling compartment." Another cheery wave, and Frank was gone.

It was incredible. Only gradually was Voss able to grasp the magnitude of his blunder, the treachery of his

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own mind, seemingly so faultless in its operation, which had remembered every other detail and had forgotten — of all the ignominious, obvious things — Pepper.

For Pepper and Myrtle were devoted to each other. She referred to herself as his "Muvver." He was a small, beagle-type dog, a cheerful extrovert whose devotion to Myrtle did not prevent him from indulging in an occasional night out, and he had chosen last night for one of these escapades.

Voss closed his eyes. The veranda seemed to echo, as it had last evening, with Myrtle's strident summons: "Here, Peppy, Peppy!" But they had waited in vain for the sound of Pepper tearing through the shrubbery and up the driveway, for his joyful voice proclaiming that he was home. Ordinarily, Myrtle would have kept on calling, at intervals, until Pepper showed up — as he always did, sooner or later — looking ashamed and proud in equal parts. Ordinarily, it wouldn't have mattered that he was still not back.

But there was nothing ordinary about last night and this morning. That was just the point: Voss had to make this extraordinary, deranged, secret stretch of time *seem* ordinary. He had to. And it was impossible, because all his calculations had been made minus Pepper.

A current of panic ran through him. He willed himself to stand still and think. Now was no time to lose his head, or to dissolve in futile self-recrimination. He must think, the way he had thought last night, with that beautiful, unhurried precision . . .

Pepper at large, perhaps galloping around the neighborhood calling attention to himself, was a shocking hazard. But to call the little beast would only advertise more fatally the fact that he was not where he ought to be, and furthermore that Voss knew it.

There was nothing to do, then, but wait.

He rubbed his clammy hands against his pajama pants. His knees threatened to buckle under him. But it was somehow unthinkable to sit down. He stood in the middle of the veranda, staring at the screen door, where the bougainvillea climbed, trying to get in. It was the personification of Myrtle, that burgeoning vine. Its harsh purplish flowers were her color, and the way it swarmed over everything, its boundless vulgarity — it was Myrtle to the life.

There was nothing to do but wait . . .

Then all at once Pepper was there. He barked, in an apologetic way, as if he were anxious to make clear that he was only suggesting — but no means demanding — that he be let in. And when Voss tottered to the screen and opened it, the dog swaggered in with an uneasy attempt at bravado.

Trembling all over, Voss collapsed in one of the wicker chairs. He could hear the little dog clicking off in search of a more demonstrative wel-

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come. And in spite of all he could do, memory re-enacted for him last night's whole flawless (almost) project, after — Well, just after. It had seemed to work itself out with such magical accuracy. First of all, the heaven-sent circumstances of Myrtle's visit to her sister, who lived (bless her heart) in an inland town, the road to which was infrequently traveled, curving, and in spots precipitous. Ideal for Voss's purposes. Who was likely to be abroad at three thirty in the morning to see him, either when he left the house — with Myrtle's body and the bicycle bundled in the back seat of her car — or when he returned, alone on the bicycle?

The answer was, no one. He had had the whole moonless, empty world to himself; he had managed the crash — like everything else — with dreamlike precision.

And when Myrtle's body and her car were found smashed to bits at the bottom of the gorge, who was going to pry too much? Accidents happened all the time, and Myrtle was a notoriously rash driver.

He had thought of everything, including Myrtle's suitcase which, obligingly enough, she had already packed, and the new hat she had bought for her trip. It had a red veil, not quite the same shade as the flower trimming. Trust Myrtle. He had been very proud of remembering about the hat.

Only he had forgotten Pepper. She never went anywhere without him; she would as soon set out stark naked as without Pepper. She did not trust him to ride on the seat beside her; the possibility that something in the passing scene might prove too much for his inquiring temperament terrified her. So she had had a special traveling case built for him. The case, with Pepper inside, was placed on the floor of the front seat, during even the shortest trips.

When not in use, the case was stored in a corner of the garage. That was where it was now, along with Voss's own car, the one he used to drive back and forth to work. If only, last night, he had happened to glance in that particular corner . . . He must get rid of it. And he must get rid of Pepper.

At least Pepper was here, under his control, no longer prancing around in public. Perhaps he had already been noticed? Perhaps, Voss answered himself grimly. In which case it would simply be his word against someone else's. All right, his word. But there was no way whatever to account for a hale and hearty Pepper here in the house, or for the telltale case, sitting undamaged in the garage. Voss recalled his own remote voice, replying to Frank: "Oh, yes. Of course she took Pepper." That was his story, and to make it stick, both Pepper and the traveling case ought to be in the car at the bottom of the gorge.

Well, he could get them there. He had his own car. He saw, with a flash of excitement and renewed hope, that there was time, that he still had a chance. A much chancier chance than the one he had taken last night, when

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no one had been around to notice his coming and going. It was broad daylight now. Even so, he would be safe enough, once he (and Pepper, and the case) got on the road that led to the gorge. Getting there was the tricky part; to reach the turn-off he would have to drive through one stretch of the American colony — dark and silent last night, but buzzing with activity now that morning was here. Someone would be sure to see him. Not that that was necessarily fatal. The point was that someone would be sure to hear Pepper, who invariably barked his head off the minute he was put in his case, and kept it up until he reached his destination. No, it was a risk that simply could not be taken. Pepper must be disposed of, silenced forever, before he set off on his final trip.

How to do it? This was the problem, stripped to its basic bones.

As if on cue, Pepper appeared in the doorway between the veranda and the living room. His expression was one of friendly inquiry. If this turned out to be a game of hide and seek, his manner seemed to convey, then they could count on him; he was always ready for fun and games; if, on the other hand, his favorite human being had actually gone away and left him —

Well, Pepper was no dog to brood. You would never catch him stretched out on somebody's grave, or refusing to eat and moping himself away to a shadow. Love came easy to this small, sturdy, lively little creature.

Voss eyed him, and Pepper, mistaking speculation for interest, trotted over, all sociability. My God, thought Voss, he'd even get attached to *me*, given time. Which of course was precisely what Pepper was not going to be given. He did not know this, however. He did not know that Voss's heart had all but withered, that he was not yet capable of the tiniest flicker of sympathy for any living thing. In cheerful ignorance, the dog sat down beside Voss's feet — tentatively, with his tail thumping and his spotted head cocked upward. He seemed to be smiling.

"Go away," said Voss coldly.

Pepper could take a hint; still smiling amiably, he ambled over to the living-room door.

A gun would be the easiest way. One neat shot — it would sound like a car back-firing, in case anyone happened to hear it — and a quick, unobtrusive burial. No problem there, with a body as small as Pepper's. But Voss did not own a gun.

Well, there was gas. Except that there wasn't. Everything here was electric.

Where did you stab a dog? That is . . . Voss glanced toward the door, where Pepper sat, alert for the smallest sign of encouragement. His anatomy must be roughly like that of a human being. But somehow his front legs became, in Voss's mind, a hopeless complication. Pepper wasn't large, but he was strong and wiry. And he loved life; he would hang on to it with all his might.

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Voss turned away from Pepper's trustful gaze, and, as he turned, his eye fell on the bougainvillea. One strand had thrust its way inside the screen door, probably when he let Pepper in; it swung there, searching for a toe-hold. He went over, shoved it out savagely, and hooked the screen door against it.

From time to time Pepper left his post to make another fruitless tour of the house. After each trip he looked a little less debonair, a little more anxious. Now he pattered over to Voss's side and uttered a series of barks. Not loud, but insistent.

He would have to be kept quiet until the method of permanent disposal had been decided upon. Food would do it. Voss stood up. Here at least was something he could handle. And anyway, Pepper, being condemned, was entitled to a hearty breakfast. The dog bustled out to the kitchen ahead of Voss, all eagerness and good humor again.

The business of opening a can of dog food and filling Pepper's water bowl was calming. But Voss was startled to see that it was now nine thirty; he should have been at the office an hour ago. He phoned at once, with the first excuse that occurred to him.

His secretary, a flip type, said sure, she understood about his headache, and had he tried tomato juice? Or a hair of the dog?

He had a perilous impulse to laugh and laugh. "I'll see you after lunch," he said icily, and hung up.

Meanwhile Pepper, full of peace and breakfast, had retired to his favorite spot under the dining-room table for a nap. His round stomach rose and fell rhythmically. Now and then his forehead puckered, or his paws flicked busily, in pursuit of a dream-rabbit. Watching him, Voss felt a drowsiness, almost like hypnosis, creeping over him.

The jangling of the telephone jerked him to his feet, wild-eyed and suddenly drenched in cold sweat. After three rings, however, he had collected his wits and was able to answer in a normal, deliberate voice.

"Is that you, Voss? Is something wrong? Why aren't you at the office?" Myrtle's sister sounded flurried. But then she always did.

She always interrupted, too. He had barely begun to explain about his headache when she broke in. "But Voss, what I called about — what's happened to Myrtle? I thought she was going to get an early start, I've been expecting her for hours."

"You mean she's not there yet?" He paused, just long enough. "But I don't understand it. She left here before six —"

"Before six! But it's ten thirty now, and it's only a three-hour drive — at the very most!"

"I know," he said, aware that the slight edge of irritation in his voice was a convincing touch: worry often made people snappish. "She certainly should be there by now. I don't understand it. I'd better — What had I better do? I can check with —"

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"Now keep calm. There must be some simple explanation."

"I don't know what," he said bleakly. "Thank God you called me. I'll get in touch with Frank Dallas right away. He'll know what to do. In the meantime, if you hear anything —"

"I will. Of course I'll call you." Her voice quavered.

This was according to schedule. He had expected the call from Myrtle's sister; the only change was that his next move — to report his problem to good old Frank — must now be delayed until Pepper was dead and at the bottom of the gorge.

Pepper strolled in, pausing at the doorway to yawn luxuriously and stretch each leg in turn. The sight of him chilled Voss; he had a moment's sharp, appalling view not only of his own peril but of his own irresponsibility in the face of it. How could he have let so much of the morning slip by in weak hesitation? What kind of tricks was his mind playing on him, that he could draw an easy breath with Pepper still here to blow his story to smithereens?

It's Pepper or me, he thought. Life or death. Dog eat dog.

In a frenzy now that time was so short, he rushed to the sideboard in the dining room and snatched the carving knife from the drawer. Pepper capered at his heels, making little jumps toward his knee. How easy it would be to grab him by his muzzle, force his head back, and, quickly, with one stroke of the knife . . .

Only not in here. In the kitchen. Tiles, instead of rush matting.

But at that moment it came — the phone call that exploded what was left of his original carefully planned schedule. It was Frank, and his voice was even heartier than usual, in a transparent effort to hide his concern. "Look, Voss, I just had a long-distance call from Myrtle's sister. Seems Myrtle hasn't shown up yet . . ."

Damn the woman, damn her! But damn himself, too, for not foreseeing that she would jump the gun and call Frank herself, instead of leaving it to him. He made a desperate snatch to salvage what little he could. "I know. I've been trying to get you, but your line was busy."

"Now don't get in a sweat, Voss. Like I told her sister, there are any number of simple explanations. Pepper might have gotten car-sick. He does sometimes, you know. I'll get right on it and call you the minute we've found out."

Abandon the idea of getting Pepper and the traveling case out to the gorge. Scrap it — there was no time. There was just time, now, to kill him, hide his body and the case temporarily, and hope that his absence in the wreckage might at first be overlooked. Then later . . .

It came to him then — the best way, the obvious method that he should have thought of right away. He could put Pepper to sleep, the way a veterinary would. Giddy with relief, Voss hurried into the bathroom

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and flung open the door of the medicine chest. Both he and Myrtle had prescriptions for sleeping pills. A handful of those . . .

There was one lonesome capsule rattling around in his own prescription bottle. Myrtle had evidently packed hers. They were nowhere to be found. It was hopeless, but he could not bring himself to stop searching. Not until the phone rang.

This time Frank's voice, drained of its usual heartiness, was all hushed gravity. "Voss, I'm afraid you've got to prepare yourself for some bad news . . . There's been an accident, a bad one . . . I'll be with you in ten minutes, old man."

Ten minutes, and Pepper still here to give the lie to the whole "accident" story. For his presence would surprise Frank. It would set him to wondering, set him to investigating what wouldn't bear investigating. Pepper stood at Voss's knee, the question — "What can I do for you, sir?" — on the tip of his cordial pink tongue.

"You can die," whispered Voss.

Ten minutes left — probably only nine by now. Voss cast an agonized glance around the room, with its jumble of tawdry color and design, its clutter of Myrtle's gimcracks.

The paperweight was right there on the table beside him. Heavy; a solid, ugly chunk of onyx that fitted suggestively in his hand. One stunning blow aimed at the brown spot between Pepper's ears, and the rest would be easy.

Clasping the paperweight, Voss sat down and patted his lap invitingly. "Here, Peppy," he said.

Pepper leaped up at once; he was used to being held and petted. Snuggling the little dog's head in the crook of his left arm, Voss slowly raised the paperweight, poised it, focusing eye, hand, and will for the one smashing blow.

But he could not bring himself to do it. Now, at this untimely, this fatal, moment, he felt his withered heart stir and come to life — as it should have done for Enid.

His arm sagged; the paperweight thudded to the floor. He grabbed Pepper's warm, sturdy body between his two hands and glared down into the trustful eyes. He did not really like the foolish, friendly creature any more than he ever had. But it was as if he were holding here, in Pepper's compact person, an engine of life. It set up in him a responsive current, melting away the numbness, throbbing all through him in a triumphant flood of warmth.

Yes, triumphant — although he was lost and he knew it, although he could hear the sound of Frank's car already turning into the driveway.

His hands tightened convulsively on Pepper, who had heard too, and was struggling to free himself. Then Voss gave a helpless laugh — or maybe it was a sob — and let go.

Bursting with his tidings of welcome, Pepper rushed out to the veranda. After a moment Voss followed him to the screen door and waited there — waited for Frank.

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We are happy to welcome Arthur Porges to the pages of EQMM — with as ingenious a spoof of Sherlock Holmes as it has been our good fortune to offer you in years. Actually, it is a double-barrelled detective story (to use a classic phrase), being not only a parody-pastiche of The One and Only but also an equally clever pastiche-parody of Carter Dickson's (John Dickson Carr's) Sir Henry Merrivale.

Mr. Porges is single, just turned 40, and a mathematics instructor at Los Angeles City College. He sold his first story, a fantasy, in 1950, and since that time has had at least a dozen tales in Anthony Boucher's F&SF — indeed, Porges credits Mr. Boucher with having taught him "the facts of life about plotting." Mr. Porges's stories have also appeared in anthologies, both in the United States and abroad, and one such volume has given him a tremendous literary thrill — it is an anthology containing stories by, among others, Ernest Hemingway and W. Somerset Maugham.

It is interesting to record that Mr. Porges is a "crank" (his own word) on the subject of Rudyard Kipling's work: he thinks that Kipling's later stories — the ones seldom read these days — are much finer than critics are willing to admit (or, in Mr. Porges's opinion, able to perceive).

The first Porges story in EQMM is an outrageous (again, his own word) tale of a grotesque murder in a "locked room" — a locked room, we hasten to tell you, with a brand-new solution. You will also find brand-new parody names for both The Master and Watson, and a cast of characters "out of this world" — including Dr. Jekyll, Captain Ahab, and Quasimodo.

HER LAST BOW; *or,*
An Adventure of Stately Homes

by ARTHUR PORGES

STATELY HOMES (OF ENGLAND), THE detective, reached out a long arm, took down the gasogene, and after putting three large pills in a glass, filled it with amber liquid. I watched sympathetically, knowing that he suffered from a rare hereditary disease, gas on the genes, the symptoms of which were fits of depression, a compulsion to hold pistol practice indoors, and a strange delusion that the violin could be played

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effectively when held across the knees. Luckily, a monk named Mendel had discovered the ailment, and Homes was now under competent treatment.

My friend gulped the liquid, frowned at the trio of pills left at the bottom of the glass, and with marvelous dexterity flipped them one at a time into three of the bullet holes that spelled a patriotic V. R. over the mantel.

"What I really need is an absorbing problem—something for the intellect—not medicine, Sun Wat," he told me bitterly. "*You* understand hereditary illness—you are Sikh, I believe."

I nodded agreement, caressing my fierce black whiskers.

"Born Sikh, Sahib."

At that moment there was the sound of heavy, lumbering footsteps on the stairs, together with the incomprehensible protests of our Swedish landlady, Mrs. Hutsut. Then the door flew open, and in charged a huge, barrel-shaped man with a bright purple face.

"Ah," Homes said languidly. "Sir Henry Merrivale with a locked room mystery, no doubt."

"Burn me!" our visitor roared indignantly. "Everybody knows my business as soon as I do!"

"Elementary," Homes murmured. "When did you ever have any other kind of case? Did anybody you know manage to get killed outdoors or in an unlocked room? If so, we haven't heard about it."

"I'm the Old Man," H. M. said with pride. "They always come to me in such matters. I've forgotten what it's like to turn the knob of a door and walk right in like other detectives. Yes, I'm the Old Man," he repeated, a plaintive note entering his voice. "But this case, Homes, must call for a mere child—I'm baffled."

"Who's dead in a hermetically sealed chamber now?" my friend mused aloud. "Who's been stabbed in a locked bank vault behind four feet of reinforced concrete and no weapon to be found, or strangled in a sunken submarine under three hundred fathoms of icy water. Who has—?"

"Archons of Athens!" H. M. interrupted, glaring at him. Then he blushed, his vast face turning a riper purple. "Sorry, that's Dr. Fell's line. But burn me, son—!"

"The facts, if you please," Homes cut in sharply. "The victim first."

Merrivale rubbed his immense bald dome.

"An old gal by the name of Marple." He winked. "One of our crowd, really. An artful puss with a nose for crime. Comes from the most depraved little town I've ever heard of. You couldn't pay me to spend a night there."

"Most interesting," was Homes's cool comment. "But the circumstances of the murder, pray. I must have facts."

Our caller swelled with fury.

"Facts! Looky, son—" For a mo-

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ment he seemed too overcome to continue; but a glance at Homes's unmoved face had its effect. "There's an old basement in a ruined house," he went on, with a horrible scowl. "It was becoming a danger to children, so they made the owner seal it up a year ago. He did a bang-up job—concreted the door and windows. Solid, mind you; no hanky-panky—inches of the stuff. The only opening is a round hole five inches in diameter, where some pipe used to go. Took us two hours to break in with picks."

Homes's eyes sparkled.

"Capital, eh, Sun Wat?"

"Burn it all!" Merrivale howled. "You haven't even heard the real problem yet. When we finally did get in, we found that the old gal had been completely dismembered—"

"—Bombay, '78," Homes interjected serenely. "The Black Lotus Case. Still unsolved. There's nothing new under the sun, Sir Henry."

"Ain't there!" H. M. snorted. "Looky here—the woman's arms, legs, and head had been chopped off, and her torso cut in two lengthwise like a herring. Lopping off the victim's cokernut ain't new, but—"

"A little more thorough than usual," Homes remarked. "However—"

"Lord love a duck—gimme a chance! Just pay attention to the Old Man a minute. All those parts were fastened to the trunk with twine—literally sewed on, with a neat, workmanlike stitch, too. Likewise the halves of the torso were rejoined." He glared ferociously at us.

At this Homes blinked; and getting up he began to pace the floor, taking long nervous strides.

"Stitched together!" he exclaimed. "My dear chap, why in Heaven's name—?"

"Exactly what that ass, Masters, keeps saying," was the moody reply.

"Are there no clues? No suspects? No motive?"

"Clues!" Sir Henry bellowed. "Looky, son, the murderer knocked her on the head in there, took off her clothes, cut her up like a sausage, sewed her together again, and strolled out. All that bothers *us* is just how he walked through a concrete wall—or out of a hole not big enough for a cat. Simple, hey? Only a five-inch opening. All the rest solid stone and mortar, completely undisturbed." He paused, fixing a hideous gaze on each of us in turn. "Motive? That's easy. Marple was on the trail of a killer. As usual, she spotted him because some simple-minded chap in her own sweet little village had the same traits—a kind of hobby, she suggested, and gave no details. Simpered and said she wasn't sure yet. But we know for a fact that her suspect is one of three men."

"Good!" Homes cried. "We are getting on. Pray name them."

"First," H. M. said, with another horrible scowl, "there's a doctor."

My friend rubbed his acid-stained hands together in satisfaction.

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"Excellent. The ability and means to dissect a body. Who is he?"

"Quite respectable, burn me. Don't know what Marple was thinking. Moves in top circles socially. Presentable young fellow. Name of Jekyll."

Homes looked thoughtful. Then he reached up for the fat biographical reference work of his own compiling. He riffled the pages eagerly. "Hanaud, Javert—hum—no Jekyll. This is very odd, Sun Wat. Surely we've heard that name before."

"You once suggested, after examining a glove of his," I reminded him, "that the man was not all he seemed."

His face lit up.

"True. Now I remember. It was not the glove of a decent person. There were distinct traces—mark my word, Sir Henry, we haven't heard the last of Dr. Jekyll. I'm convinced he's leading a double life."

"All this isn't getting us any forarder, Mr. Homes—burn it all!—that's Inspector Lestrade's line. I'll have to watch that."

"The next suspect," Homes demanded impatiently.

"A nasty bit of goods. Dwarf named Quasimodo. Scum from across the channel."

"Dwarf? And a five-inch hole? Most suggestive, my dear fellow."

"Won't do, son. He's short, but hunchbacked, and his shoulders are broader than mine, even if his corporation ain't. Not that he wouldn't commit murder; he's mental, all right. Unrequited love, I suspect." An unspeakable leer contorted his face. "Used to lie in wait for old Marple and call her 'Esmeralda.'"

"And the third man?"

"Another nut. Old sailor—whaling captain to be exact."

Instantly Homes stopped pacing.

"Whaling captain! Quick—his name!"

"Ahab. Captain Ahab," H. M. said, bewilderment in his voice.

"I knew it!" Homes cried. "Old Captain Ahab, the fanatic. Why, then the mystery is solved. All becomes clear. I should have guessed it directly."

Sir Henry inflated like a great, choleric frog.

"Looky, Homes—!" he yelled.

"Come, Merrivale," my friend cut him off; "don't tell me you haven't seen Ahab's superb models. They're on display at every ship chandler's in London."

"Models!" The back of H. M.'s neck turned plum color.

"Ships in bottles. Surely the *modus operandi* of this grotesque crime is now crystal clear."

"Burn me! You mean—?"

"Exactly. When the impossible has been eliminated, whatever—er—that is—how does that infernal aphorism of mine go, Sun Wat?"

"—whatever remains, however improbable, must be true," I said quickly.

"Ah, yes; very well put. Ahab obviously murdered Marple *outside* the basement, knowing she was on

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his trail and might cause his arrest, thus preventing him from continuing his insane pursuit of an imaginary whale—a quest that has made him the laughing stock of every port in the world. He killed her with some heavy, blunt instrument, perhaps his whalebone leg. He then dismembered her—using his blubber spade, one might presume—stuffed the parts through the five-inch opening into the sealed room, and then"

—here Homes's voice unconsciously filled with admiration—"*he reassembled her, ship model fashion, using long-handled tools through the same small aperture!* For a man of his strength and skill it was absurdly simple."

"Homes," I cried, "that's marvelous deduction. Absolutely flawless."

A spasm of pain distorted his lean face. Gas on the genes again. Merrivale and I tiptoed out.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **MARGERY SHARP**

TITLE: ***The Perfect Model***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE:

LOCALES: London and Oxfordshire

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *With her customary charm and urbanity, the famous British novelist examines the perfect model of a maître d'hôtel . . . The tale of an audacious crime witnessed by a passionately curious artist and a prim and proper playwright.*

THE POULE D'ARGENT WAS ONE OF the best restaurants in London. It never advertised, and was always full. The cooking and service were admirable, the decorations — silvery walls and sea-green hangings — had a peculiar elegance. No cabaret was offered, but in the evenings a discreetly persuasive band matched the small but perfect floor. It was characteristic of the place that there was very little dancing between courses; for one thing, the food was too good to be trifled with; and for another, a rumor had gone round that Raoul did not approve.

If M. Raoul disapproved of you, it was wise to give up, at once, all hope of ever eating at the Poule d'Argent again.

For Raoul was the maître d'hôtel and the genius of the place. Some said he was the proprietor as well, but not even the boldest had ever cared to question him directly. His urbanity was equalled only by his aloofness; his manner, though exquisitely suave, was also commanding; and though urbanity and aloofness, suavity and force, may seem qualities hardly compatible with each other, the fact remains that they were all four perfectly apparent, and perfectly harmonized, whenever Raoul showed a debutante to her seat.

"He's got a remarkable face," said

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Rabin the artist to his friend Murdoch the playwright. "I'd like to do a drawing of him. A big thing. Line and wash. . . ." And he began making lines with his thumbnail on the sea-green tablecloth.

"Why don't you?" asked Murdoch idly. "He'd probably be only too flattered to sit."

"Not he. To Augustus John, perhaps, but not to a commercial bloke like me." And Rabin grinned cheerfully, for though his art was undoubtedly commercial — otherwise, indeed, he would scarcely have been able to pay for two lunches at the Poule d'Argent — it was also extremely intelligent and often beautiful. He was a caricaturist, finding most of his subjects in the theatre; and as a star of revue at that moment swept in, his hand moved instinctively to another patch of cloth.

"This ought to be one of your happy hunting grounds," said Murdoch.

Rabin nodded. That was one reason why he had become an habitué: the Poule d'Argent had a knack of attracting not only beauty, but also character. One saw there City magnates and foreign musicians, publishers, diplomats, surgeons, and K.C.s; and one saw also a sprinkling of countrified old ladies in expensive but dowdy hats. A pair of them — the Misses Frewen, of Fosgate Hall — had drifted in by accident soon after the place was opened; and Raoul had made them so comfortable, and so much at home, that they had been sending their friends there ever since.

"There's old Williams," said Murdoch.

But Rabin did not turn. He knew old Williams too well, and had never found his face particularly interesting. It was smooth and placid, supported by a stiff white collar, topped by stiff white hair, and but for these two boundary-marks, so to speak, almost completely characterless. Yet Mr. Williams, of Hammer House, Oxfordshire, was in his own way famous; he was a connoisseur of Georgian silver, and, with means to gratify his taste, had made himself a definite niche in the world of London sale-rooms. He had, too, an amiable habit, if he had bought anything in the morning, of bringing it along with him to lunch: porringers, cream-jugs, Mr. Williams carried them away in his hand like a child with a new toy, and as soon as he sat down drew the object from its case or chamois bag, and set it up before him on the table. Then indeed did his mild eyes light up, and his face wreathe itself in smiles; he looked about eagerly to see his treasure admired. In this the countrified ladies, when present, never failed to gratify him, and it was said that with several of them he had struck up quite a warm friendship, based on hallmarks. Otherwise he had to rely upon M. Raoul, who — inevitably — appeared to know almost as much about silver as did Mr. Williams himself. The maître d'hôtel was a perfect Admirable Crichton.

Slightly bored by his compan-

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ion's silence, Murdoch ostentatiously hailed a page-boy and asked to be given a paper. He had already seen all the chief news, and accordingly turned through the sheets reading desultorily here and there in the hope of some item that would catch his interest.

"Nothing but burglaries," he announced at last; he had the irritating habit of reading bits aloud. "*Daring Jewel Theft: Lady Relton's loss . . . Lady Relton's emerald pendant . . .*"

Rabin looked up.

"Silly old goose," he said unsympathetically. "I don't wonder she got it pinched. The thing must be worth thousands, and she wore it here one night on a thin platinum chain about two yards long. I've never seen Raoul look so worried in his life."

"A nasty object to have lost on one's premises," agreed Murdoch.

"It damn nearly was. She was dancing, and somehow snapped the chain; got back to her table too, before she even noticed. Then just as she let out the first shriek, there was Raoul with the thing in his hand. He must have had his eyes on her the whole time. Where was she when she lost it?"

Murdoch consulted the paper again.

"At home. *Last night, while the occupants of Relton Lodge were at dinner, the safe in Lady Relton's bedroom was rifled and her famous emerald pendant —*"

A voice at his elbow — a voice suave, charming, slightly authoritative — interrupted him.

"Coffee, messieurs?"

"Yes, black," said Rabin; while Murdoch hastily shifted his gaze to another paragraph. He had a feeling that Raoul would probably consider Police Court news out of keeping with the atmosphere of the Poule d'Argent.

"I wonder what he does in his spare time?" mused Rabin aloud.

"He hasn't any."

"He must have. He isn't always here, though I don't think he takes any regular day off. And the relaxations of a fellow like that should be at least interesting."

"He's probably the henpecked husband of a plain wife," said Murdoch, who had written three successful plays on that one theme. It now struck him that the time was perhaps ripe for a fourth, and he lapsed into meditation. . . .

During the days that followed both men kept an eye open for any further news of the Relton emeralds; but their recovery was nowhere reported, and the press seemed to have lost all interest in them. Several other burglaries were reported, however, and Murdoch noticed that as often as not the victim was an habitué of his favorite restaurant. It began to look as though the Poule d'Argent had something unlucky about it; on the other hand, it was obvious that since all its clients were persons of wealth, they in any case formed a class specially likely to be burgled. Then, some time later, Murdoch's new play went into rehearsal, and for the next fortnight

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he wouldn't have bothered if someone stole the Crown jewels.

"You're driving yourself silly," said Rabin, meeting him one night in the bar of the Café Royal. "Why don't you take a day off and leave them to it?"

The dramatist groaned, and all the more bitterly because he knew that the other spoke sense. He had stuck to rehearsals too closely, watching every gesture, listening to every word, till neither words nor gestures had any meaning, and till his brain, when asked for an extra line or a change of dialogue, refused to function. So when Rabin proposed to take him the next day for a run in the country — the artist had a passion for autumn motoring — Murdoch willingly agreed.

"We'll start early, and get a good run before dark," Rabin had said; but in the morning Murdoch's leading lady insisted on his presence at her dressmaker's, after which he had naturally to take her out to lunch; and four o'clock found the motorists no farther than the Marble Arch. They were in the thick, moreover, of a fine traffic jam that extended (or so it seemed) as far as eye could reach.

"We're here till Doomsday," grumbled Murdoch. "It's my fault, and I apologize, but honestly I think we'd better chuck it. Let's go along to Christie's instead; there's some rather good silver up this afternoon. Old Williams is sure to be there, and I'd like to see him do his stuff."

But Rabin was paying no attention. Indeed, he had his head so far out of the window that it seemed likely he had not even heard. Murdoch sat back to wait: he knew that until an artist had finished looking at whatever it was that caught his eye, there was no use shouting at him; and since he himself was often similarly caught up and absorbed by a fragment of overheard dialogue, or by the mannerism of a passer-by, he could sympathize.

"What have you seen now?" he asked patiently, as Rabin at last drew in his head.

The answer was more interesting than he had expected.

"Our friend Raoul," said Rabin. "In the next car but one. And incognito . . ."

At once — such was the magnetism of that personality — Murdoch craned over and peered through the traffic. He saw a small, rather shabby two-seater driven by a man in a rather shabby cap.

"It isn't!" he said disgustedly.

"I tell you it is."

Murdoch looked again.

"He'd never drive a car like that. He'd never wear a cap like that. Why, it isn't even very like him."

"If I've drawn his face once," said Rabin, "I've drawn it a dozen times. I know the bones. If he looks different, it's partly because of the clothes, and partly because he's stopped being the perfect maître d'hôtel. That's what I've always wanted to see — Raoul off duty."

At that moment the car in front

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began to move, and as they followed the stream they saw the two-seater slip neatly ahead. The confident efficiency of that driving did more to convince Murdoch than any of Rabin's arguments.

"It may be," he admitted, "but all the same it's a dashed queer thing. I wonder where he's going?"

The artist grinned.

"Our way, it looks like. I've a good mind to trail him."

Murdoch sat up. He had no desire to spend the rest of the afternoon in a wild-goose chase round the London suburbs, and he had little confidence in his friend's discretion. Rabin, despite many admirable and attractive qualities, was undeniably a busybody — positively un-English, in fact, in his readiness to risk a snubbing in order to gratify his curiosity. He was the sort of man who didn't mind making a fool of himself. Murdoch, on the other hand, was the sort of man who did.

"Don't be such an ass," he protested, as they followed the two-seater round the Marble Arch and into the Edgware Road. "You've got a bee in your bonnet about the man. I've no doubt he's a perfectly ordinary respectable sort of fellow, and whatever he's up to is no business of ours."

"Ah, but you've never really appreciated him," retorted Rabin. "Whatever else he is, I'll swear he's not ordinary. He's got a terrific personality — such an absolute whopper of a personality that he's made the Poule d'Argent his oyster; and I don't believe even that satisfies him. Once or twice lately I've seen him look a bit bored. Majestically bored. Like Alexander sighing for new worlds to conquer . . ."

"You're mad," said Murdoch comfortably. "Running the Poule d'Argent is a job for any man."

"But he does it too easily," insisted the artist. "With one hand, so to speak. What I want to know is what he does with the other. Something either very exciting, or very big. Perhaps he's a power in the City and a director of the Bank."

M. Raoul's immediate actions, however, hardly supported this last hypothesis. His first stop, which occurred some five minutes later, was outside a small public house behind Paddington Station; the Fox and Goose by name, it was definitely not the sort of place to be frequented by financial magnates. He did not go in, but merely halted long enough to take up a passenger — a small, narrow-faced man whose obviously new suit somehow accentuated his general seediness. He greeted M. Raoul with great deference, but wasted no time in conversation; and at once the car moved off.

"How about that?" asked Rabin triumphantly.

"Odd," admitted Murdoch.

"Very odd indeed; an old lag, by the look of him. Feeling any curiosity yet?"

Murdoch did not answer; but he ceased to protest. He still felt slightly uncomfortable about the business,

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but that last episode had done much to allay his qualms. It was — well, suspicious; and when people acted suspiciously it was practically the duty of a good citizen to keep an eye on them. He sat passively acquiescent, therefore, while Rabin slowed down in the thinning traffic, and dropped well behind the quarry, with the acknowledged aim of escaping observation; and presently showed a more active interest by remarking that for so small and ancient a car the two-seater seemed to possess a very fair turn of speed.

"It does indeed," agreed the artist. "Did you see him accelerate? It's my belief that car goes a good deal faster than you'd expect."

The judgment proved correct; as soon as Edgware was left behind M. Raoul's car shot suddenly ahead. In the unrestricted areas it was doing a good 50 miles an hour, and though Rabin had no difficulty in keeping up he began to be afraid that a sudden spurt would finally shake him off. The two-seater was in no way conspicuous; except for its surprising speed it resembled dozens of other cars of the same popular make, and once lost would be almost impossible to find again. Little by little, therefore, Rabin crept up till he was no more than twenty yards behind.

"It's getting damned cold," said Murdoch, with a shiver. "I'd like to know where he's making for."

"You'd better pray for a weekend cottage near Tring," replied the artist.

Murdoch sneezed.

"Let's chuck it," he said imploringly. "I'm frozen stiff, and after all it's damned silly. The fellow probably *has* a weekend cottage; he's probably just going down to take a look at it."

But Rabin only grinned.

"With an ex-convict to buttle?" he said. "Not likely. If you want to cry off I'll put you down at the next A.A. box, and you can 'phone to a garage for a car."

Murdoch was too much annoyed to answer, but merely slumped down as far as possible in the seat, dug his chin into the collar of his overcoat, and closed his eyes. He was very tired, and in spite of cold, irritation, and general discomfort, presently dropped into a deep sleep.

He was awakened, about an hour and a half later, by the sudden silence of the engine. Rabin had stopped the car outside a good-sized village inn — not on the lighted stretch of gravel that served as car-park, but in the darkness beyond.

"Good idea," said Murdoch, preparing to get out. "Mine's a double whiskey. Where are we?"

Rabin unceremoniously thrust him back.

"You're not going in," he said callously, "and I think we're somewhere in Oxfordshire. You wait there. And you needn't worry, because I'm not going in either. I'm just going to see what Raoul has been looking at."

Murdoch looked towards the inn again, and saw a tall silhouette move away from one of the windows. The

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next minute there was the sound of an engine being accelerated, and Rabin strolled across the gravel. He was back almost at once.

"Nothing out of the way," he reported, starting the car, "except one big fellow sleepy-drunk."

"And nothing particularly out of the way about that," snapped Murdoch crossly.

"Except — thank Heaven no one can go fast in these lanes! — except that he looked like a manservant. Black jacket, and all the rest. Gentlemen's gentlemen don't usually get tight at the local. On the other hand, he might have met an old friend, because there were a couple of obvious townees. The one thing certain is that from where Raoul was standing he got a good clear view of the party. . . . By gum, look at that!"

The lane had suddenly twisted; immediately ahead, pulled in well to one side, stood an unoccupied two-seater. Rabin drove slowly by, and within fifty yards found himself on a main road. It was plain that no one contemplating that route would first have abandoned his car; and Rabin took the hint.

"This is where we get out," he said, backing up the lane again, "and I believe Raoul's chosen the best parking place. Or at any rate the least conspicuous. There was a sort of drive to the right as we passed his car, but anyone using that would be most likely to come from the road. The lane's simply a short cut to the pub."

With exemplary courtesy he brought his car to a stop well behind the two-seater, and so close to the hedge that Murdoch had to follow him out across the driving-seat. Rabin reached back into the pocket, and there found a torch; which was lucky, since without it they would scarcely have been able to make out the small, dilapidated finger-post that leaned among the bushes at the opening of the drive.

"To Hammer House," read Murdoch. "Good Lord — isn't that old Williams's place?"

Rabin nodded.

"It is. And it's almost a dead cert. that Williams is still in town. If our fellow wants to pay a social call, he's showing unusual lack of intelligence."

Then, as they followed the drive, they instinctively stopped talking.

Hammer House, despite its imposing name, was little more than a large cottage; but it presented a lovely example of the black-and-white style. Even through the dusk there was no mistaking its perfect proportions; the deep thatch showed smooth and solid, the white plaster and black beams made a fine conspicuous pattern, and it was evident that Mr. Williams spared no expense in the upkeep of his dwelling.

"He's a connoisseur, all right!" thought Rabin, with unenvious pleasure; for it was good to see such a place safe in appreciative hands. What a setting, too, for that collection of silver! The house was no doubt as perfect inside as out, and Rabin could imagine the old man pottering

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through the exquisite rooms in perpetual contemplation of his shining treasures. "Lucky they're not fragile," added Rabin mentally. "I wonder who looks after him?" Then he remembered the manservant at the inn; unintoxicated, he would fit in very well with Mr. Williams and Hammer House, though at the moment patently neglecting his duty — as Raoul, if he knew anything about the household, must have seen . . .

A fantastic suspicion crossed Rabin's mind: it occurred to him that M. Raoul might indirectly have been paying for the manservant's drinks. Before he had time to reject, or even to consider the idea, however, Murdoch spoke.

"A dashed nice little place," he commented softly.

Rabin took a step forward.

"Let's go round. I want to see the back."

To avoid passing too close to the house, they essayed a narrow sapling-bordered path which appeared to follow the edge of the lawn, but which, after the first few yards, began to wind so unnecessarily and persistently that Rabin had little hesitation in identifying it as a Wilderness Walk on the Victorian model. It corkscrewed through a spinney, struck boldly out to the right, and finally looped round again to be brought to an ignominious end by a small wicket gate. Looking across this the two men found that they had made a half-circuit not only of the house but of the grounds as well; they were standing at the bottom of a rose garden; and their devious approach had given them at least this advantage, that they were able to observe unseen, and unsuspected, the remarkable proceedings of M. Raoul.

He was engaged in burglary.

As might have been expected, he engaged in it with the utmost dignity. There was no vulgar breaking of locks, or shinning of waterpipes; a window had indeed by some means been forced, but it was the seedy little confederate who scrambled through. M. Raoul simply waited patiently until the back door was opened to him, and then walked quietly in.

Down by the gate Murdoch, who had unconsciously been holding his breath, let out a long astonished sigh.

"Good Lord! Did you see that?"

"Yes," said Rabin — but in a very different tone. "It was charming . . ."

The dramatist swung round.

"Charming be hanged! We ought to go for the police!"

"You can. You'd better take the car and get back to the pub, or else try for a 'phone box on that road. I'll stay here. I might be able to stop him getting away. And besides I want to *see* him."

Murdoch looked at his friend suspiciously. He had an artistic temperament himself — but not to that extent.

"If I come back and find you an accessory," he warned, "there'll be no bailing you out."

Rabin laughed.

"As a proof of my good faith," he

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said, "let me recommend that you pause by the other car, find a spanner, and take the top off the carburetor."

Rabin's subsequent adventures, from the time Murdoch left him until the extraordinarily prompt arrival of the police, occupied no more than ten minutes; but every moment was packed with interest. As a beginning, he went quietly up through the rose garden and investigated the back door. It was closed, but not locked; Rabin pushed it open, stepped inside, and thrust it to again. Within, all was dark save for a square of light high up at the other end of the passage. Keeping close to the wall, the artist stole towards it. He stumbled once, but without noise, against what felt like a large chest; edged past, and reached a second door. The light came from a small window or peep-hole cut in it at the height of a man's head, and towards this Rabin, with infinite precaution, approached and applied his eye.

Luck was with him. The first thing he saw was a back.

It was the back of M. Raoul. The smaller man, seen in profile, was fully occupied in opening a safe.

Now there occurs sometimes in real life a situation so obviously reminiscent of the stage or the novelette that the spectator cannot take it seriously. If it be tragic, he cannot weep; if threatening, he cannot feel afraid; and so it was now with Rabin. He stood there watching with as calm (though intense) an interest as if he had been seated in an orchestral stall.

He took it all in. He noted the reason for the pierced door: the window was there to give light, since the room into which he was looking had been built in the thickness of the house, with walls, save for one other door, completely blank; and also for ventilation, since there was an arrangement by which the pane of glass could be lifted. The room itself was furnished, with a good deal of taste, as a gentleman's study.

Against this setting the two persons of the drama had a most piquant incongruity. The tall back of M. Raoul — it never occurred to Rabin that he might turn round — was distinguished but shabby; the little man at the safe might have stepped straight out of a thriller. He was so neat, so skillful; he worked with a queer contented smile; his fingers fluttered, his ears as he listened seemed to cock like a terrier's before a rat-hole; and every now and then he glanced up to make sure of his companion's attention. It was almost a pity that he never noticed Rabin, for he would no doubt have found the expression on the artist's face extremely gratifying.

At last the door of the safe swung open: the little man stepped back, his look a curious mingling of pride and contempt — pride in his own skill, contempt for the simplicity of the job; and Rabin very nearly applauded. M. Raoul, however, spared no more than a casually approving nod before he stepped forward and thrust in his hand. What he brought out was no fine piece of silver, but a jewel case.

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Rabin waited eagerly. On the stage, on the films, a successful burglar at this point always took a moment off to display his booty — to let the rope of pearls slide through his fingers, to flash the tiara in the best light: M. Raoul did nothing of the sort. He did indeed open the case, but so swiftly and discreetly that the safebreaker evidently saw nothing, and the artist no more than a prismatic flash. Then the case was slipped into his pocket, and it seemed that the show was over.

Never in his life had Rabin's mind or body moved so swiftly as during the next few minutes. The mood of cool spectatorship dropped from him: he too had a part in the play, but it necessitated a change of scene. His first and most urgent thought was to get out of the passage before M. Raoul entered it; he had no intention of taking on two men in so small a space. Outside in the darkness there was at least a chance of knocking M. Raoul out with a flying tackle, snatching the case, and getting away to the car; and Rabin was out in the garden again before he remembered that the car had in all probability been taken by Murdoch . . .

"Damn!" thought Rabin, running for the shadow of the trees. "I'll have to sit on his head till that fool turns up with the police. And if the little fellow gets away, I can't help it."

This hare-brained plan seemed, at that melodramatic moment, perfectly feasible; and Rabin was never disillusioned, since before he could put it into action, and as he plunged through the belt of trees, someone tackled him. Oddly enough, it was exactly the tackle he had himself contemplated — low down, from behind: Rabin pitched forward on his head and took no further interest in the proceedings.

When he came to again he found himself very comfortable except for a heavy weight behind his eyes. He was stretched out on a sofa, and as he lay there on his back he could see, by turning his eyes to the right, a high mantelshelf ranged with some very beautiful silver. To the left, beyond the sofa-back, he was vaguely conscious of two figures, one wearing an ordinary Bobby's helmet, the other the flat cap of an inspector.

"The police!" thought Rabin thankfully. "And they've brought me into the house."

He tried to raise himself to see more, but the exceeding heaviness of his head convinced him that it would be better to lie still. At that moment a voice spoke: he had an idea it proceeded from the inspector, but though the tones — deep, official, and authoritative — were just what might have been expected, the words were not.

"You oughtn't to have done it, Mr. Smith," said the voice reproachfully. "One of these days you'll get into trouble — and then where shall we be?"

The invisible Mr. Smith, however, seemed completely unabashed.

"It was the only way, my dear chap. By the time you fellows had got a

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search warrant the bird — or rather the booty — would have flown."

"There you are!" returned the inspector, half-mollified, half-resentful. "*You* can act on suspicion — if you'll take the risk; we can't. Even watching the house was a risk for us. We've got to be very careful. If we so much as hurt a gentleman's feelings there's questions in Parliament. And when it's such a gentleman as *he* seemed—!"

The gentleman addressed as Mr. Smith laughed.

"All so genuine, wasn't it? This place, and the touch about collecting silver. He's a genuine connoisseur, pays in genuine cash; and has got a genuine reputation by it. . . . I suppose you know where to lay your hands on him now all right?"

"Naturally we do, sir." The inspector sounded a trifle hurt. "He's at Black's Hotel — and the cheek of it, leaving the stuff down here while he spends the night in London! Audacious, as you might say! But you needn't worry, sir; audacious as he is, you needn't worry at all."

"I won't," promised Mr. Smith. "I shall go straight back to town and give my thoughts exclusively to my dinner . . ."

The weight on Rabin's brain suddenly increased. For a moment he struggled against it, straining his ears. Was that second voice familiar, or wasn't it? It had no trace of foreign accent, as had M. Raoul's; it was crisper, lighter, yet with a certain similarity of inflection. Was it, or wasn't it? Was it, or —

The weight crushed down again; and Rabin wondered no more.

Five minutes later, when he finally recovered his wits, the room was empty save for a large and apologetic sergeant. It was he, apparently, who had been responsible for Rabin's mishap, and he earnestly hoped that the gentleman bore no ill will.

"That's all right," said Rabin, rising rather groggily to his feet. "If I get in the way of you fellows, I must take the consequences."

"Not at all, sir; we always like to encourage public spirit," returned the sergeant kindly. "Do you think you feel well enough for your friend to drive you home?"

"Perfectly," said Rabin. "By the way, what was it all about?"

"Just a little matter of duty, sir. If you're quite sure you're all right —"

"Who was the tall fellow I saw?"

"Tall?" repeated the sergeant vaguely. "Why, that would be the inspector, sir. Inspector Musgrove. And now, sir —"

"I don't mean the inspector," persisted Rabin, "I mean the fellow I saw break in."

With great firmness the sergeant assisted him towards the door.

"That's just what we mustn't tell you, sir. You'll see all about it in the papers — all that's necessary, that is. But we're very grateful to you, sir, and I've no doubt you're wanting to be off."

Rabin went. The leave-taking was marked, on the official side, by great affability, on the artist's by a certain

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sulkiness. Murdoch, who had brought the car up to the front door, was more resigned.

"It's no good," he said, when he had digested Rabin's information without offering any in exchange. "You never get anything out of them. Until a couple of minutes ago they left me sitting outside in the lane . . ."

"Where did you come across them?" asked Rabin, still thirsting for enlightenment.

"As soon as I turned into the main road. They'd just got out of a car. When I said there was a burglary on, they thanked me politely and told me to stay put. So I'll tell you what I did do: I finished this morning's paper."

"You would," groaned the artist. "Why didn't you follow?"

"Because I always believe," explained Murdoch rather primly, "in obeying police instructions. And as it happens, I seem to have discovered something relevant: you remember those two old girls who lunch at the Poule d'Argent? Their name's Frewen, and they live at Fosgate Hall; and Fosgate Hall was burgled last night."

The next day, inevitably, both Murdoch and Rabin lunched at the Poule d'Argent. M. Raoul was there, and in his best form. His handling of an irritable peer was a lesson in tactics, his homage to an aging beauty a masterpiece of discreet flattery. He had more than ever the air of a man on top of his own particular world.

"It wasn't," said Murdoch for the sixth time.

For the sixth time Rabin disagreed.

"It was. I saw more of him than you did."

"But never properly. I'll admit there was a likeness, but that's all."

They had finished their sweet; in another moment M. Raoul, as was his courteous habit, would come up and inquire in person if they desired coffee; and as his tall distinguished figure approached, both men fell silent. Instinctively, they saved all their wits for the purposes of observation.

"Coffee, messieurs?"

Instead of answering, Rabin suddenly leaned across to his friend.

"By the way," he said, inventing rapidly, "a queer thing happened to me this morning. I left my car outside the flat, for not more than ten minutes, and when I came back to it some hooligan had taken the top off the carburetor . . ."

In M. Raoul's handsome face not a muscle flickered; for an instant he looked at the artist with genuine, if sardonic, interest. Then his features once more composed themselves into a calm and courteous mask; he stood patient, impassive, the perfect model of a maître d'hôtel.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **O. H. LESLIE**

TITLE: ***The Morning After***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: A city in the United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *A mother and her daughter in a highly charged emotional situation — but in a few pages you will understand these two human beings as if you had known them all your life . . .*

MRS. TROTTER PRESSED THE BUTTON five times, until her daughter responded to the buzzing and opened the door. Sharon was halfway out of a filmy negligee, dotted with little transparent stars. Her hair was blonder than ever, and rumpled attractively so that she looked like some hoydenish movie starlet. For the first time in her life, Mrs. Trotter regretted that her daughter was so beautiful.

"Ma!" Sharon said. "*Ma,* for Pete's sake. Do you know what *time* it is?"

"Eight, eight thirty. My watch isn't working."

"Don't you realize I haven't been to *bed* yet. What's the idea?"

Mrs. Trotter backed away, hesitantly. "Are you alone?"

"Of course I'm alone. But I got to bed around four. If I don't get some sleep, I'll scream." Then she must have felt ashamed of herself, because she stepped aside and said: "Well, you might as well come in."

"Thank you." Her mother's voice was proud. She walked past her daughter, but stopped a few feet before the living room, waiting for permission to enter.

"Well, come in," Sharon said wearily. "I'm awake now anyway."

The living room was some kind of Scandinavian modern. Mrs. Trotter recognized the softly curved woods and subtle fabrics from the windows of the fancy shops on Madison Avenue. There was a thickly piled white rug on the floor, and the painting of a nude on the wall.

"Have a seat. I'll make some coffee. Did you have breakfast yet?"

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"I had breakfast an hour ago." She sat gingerly on the sofa. On the coffee table, in a heavy glass ashtray with little captured air bubbles inside, lay the stump of a brown cigar. She looked away quickly, and opened her purse. "Some mail came for you. I guess you forgot to tell Dr. Schuyler your . . . new address. I think it's a bill."

"Just leave it, Ma." The girl's face softened as she watched her mother remove an envelope and place it on the table. She came over to her, and said: "You look tired. Are you taking your pills?"

"I'm all right. I came by bus. It was crowded."

"Why didn't you take a cab?"

Her mother didn't answer. Sharon shrugged, and went into the tiny kitchenette. She made clattering noises inside, and then came out with a tray holding instant coffee, hot water, and two delicate cups. She waited until the coffee was ready before she said:

"All right. Let's have it, Ma. What's the matter?"

"I didn't say anything was the matter. I had to come downtown today anyhow, for shopping. I thought I'd get a pair of hospital shoes for every day. So I figured I might as well stop by and see you. It's been more than a month, you know."

"I've been busy." Sharon was frowning, and using her fingers to bring a semblance of order to her tousled hair. "Did you get my check?"

"Yes," Mrs. Trotter said. "I got your check. That's what I wanted to talk to you about." She opened her purse again and took out a folded yellow paper. "I don't want to accept any more checks, Sharon. So I brought this one back."

The girl stared at her mother, and her voice became cold. "Why not?" she said. "What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing, nothing. I didn't say anything was wrong with it. I just don't want to accept it, Sharon. I'm getting along fine. Papa's insurance is taking care of me—I don't need luxuries." She put the check on the table, beside the bill from Sharon's dentist.

"Is it because of Ben?"

Her mother swallowed. "Who said anything about Ben? Ben is strictly your business."

"Look, Ma. You don't have to play games with me. I can read your face like a dictionary. You don't want to take the money because Ben gave it to me. Isn't that it?"

"I don't want to take it, period."

Sharon sat down and folded the negligee over her knees. She fumbled for a pack of cigarettes in her pocket, took out a crumpled cigarette, and lit it with an unsteady hand.

"You just don't understand about Ben, Ma. You don't *want* to understand. To you, the whole thing is ugly. To you, Ben is a bad man, a crook, and I'm nothing but a —"

Mrs. Trotter's face was making odd, struggling movements. Sharon

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saw the threat of tears, and put her hand out to comfort her. The older woman pushed her daughter aside, and tried to stand up.

"Ma, please! You never really let me *talk* about it. You just shut the whole subject away like in a closet. I want you to hear *my* side of it. For a change."

"I have to go now—"

"The store's not open yet! Listen to me a minute!"

Mrs. Trotter settled back, her eyes turned away. "All right, I'll listen."

Sharon found it hard to begin again. Then she said, "I love Ben, Ma. He loves me. That's the most important thing. We would have gotten married six months ago, if it wasn't for *her*." She said the last word like a curse. "I know what we're doing is against everything you were taught. But you lived a different kind of life, Ma. You had Papa, right from the start. You didn't have to sneak around behind some other woman's back—"

"No!" Mrs. Trotter said violently. "I never did! I met your father, I fell in love with him, and I married him. That was all. And before we got married, I paid my *own* rent. Do you understand? I worked hard, and I bought my own food and my own clothes. There was time enough for Papa to pay my bills later."

"Oh, what's the use!" Sharon stamped out her cigarette in the glass ashtray, and saw the cigar. She picked it up hastily, and carried it over to the brass wastebasket on the other side of the room. As she dumped it in, she said, "You got a lot of old-fashioned ideas, Ma. That's the trouble with you."

When she returned to the sofa, she was in a more conciliatory mood.

"Oh, Ma, listen to me. It would be different if I was just some floozy Ben picked up in a bar or something. But Ben *loves* me. Don't you understand that? If he can get a divorce, he'll marry me in a minute. That's what makes all the difference."

"And why can't he get a divorce?"

"I *told* you why, Ma. The whole knitting mill is in his wife's name, for business reasons. He doesn't care about that so much. But she'd absolutely bleed him to death before she'd let him go. That's the kind of a louse he's married to."

Her mother nodded sadly. "A louse," she repeated, the word sounding alien on her tongue. She had a quality of dignity, and it gave her something that her beautiful daughter didn't have. "And have you ever met this woman?"

"No," Sharon said uncomfortably. "And frankly, I'd rather not. But Ben's told me plenty."

"Yes. I'm sure he has."

Sharon sighed, and patted her mother's hand. "Look, Mom. I'm going to surprise you one of these days. I'm going to call you up and tell you to come to a wedding. You'll see."

Mrs. Trotter started to get up.

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"No, don't go, Ma. Look, how would it be if I came with you to the shoe store? They're always putting one over on you. Suppose I get dressed and come with you?"

"Why? I can manage."

"I *want* to come. You know how you are about shoes. It'll take me only a few minutes to get dressed. Okay?"

Mrs. Trotter shrugged. "If you want to."

"I'll go take a shower. You just relax for a while."

She left the room and went into the bedroom, closing the door behind her.

Mrs. Trotter sat still for two or three minutes. Then she got up, and took a thick magazine from an end table. It was devoted to Parisian fashions, and filled with photographs of slender women in settings that had no connection with the reality Mrs. Trotter knew. She closed the magazine with disgust.

She walked to the door of the bedroom, and opened it just a crack. She heard the sound of splashing water in the adjoining bathroom. She shut the door, and went back to the sofa.

A minute later the telephone rang.

She looked at it, and almost picked it up. Then, as it rang a second time, she went back to the bedroom door, opened it, and called out:

"Sharon!"

Water was still splashing, and Sharon didn't answer. She turned, and heard the telephone ring a third time. It was annoying. She went to it and lifted the receiver.

"Sharon?"

"Who's this?"

"Ben, of course!" The deep voice sounded hurried. "Listen, don't talk. I only got a minute. I have to tell you something and I have to tell you fast. She's dead. She died last night. But the important thing is this, Sharon. The police know about us; they'll be at the apartment any minute now. I had to tell them that I spent the night with you. Understand?"

The woman holding the telephone made a strangled noise.

"Now don't blow your top! This is important, you understand? Damned important! If you don't stick by me now I'll *swing* for it, Sharon! You hear me? When the police come, tell them that *I spent the night with you.*"

Mrs. Trotter's throat had closed. She couldn't have said a word, even if she had wanted to. She held the telephone away from her, and stared at the instrument as if it were some black, loathsome animal.

"Sharon! Did you hear what I said?"

"Yes, yes," Mrs. Trotter whispered, as if from far away.

"All right then. Remember what I told you. And I'll see you as soon as I can. Goodbye, honey."

Click.

Mrs. Trotter put down the telephone and thought of her pills. She fumbled on the sofa for her purse,

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and turned it upside down until the three little plastic vials tumbled out. She selected the one with the red-speckled capsules, took out two, and let them dissolve in her mouth.

Then she went to the bedroom and opened the door wide. Sharon was just leaving the bath.

"Did you want something, Ma?"

"No." Mrs. Trotter's voice was unusually calm. "You go ahead and dress."

"Want to come in? It must be dull for you out there. The teevee's on the fritz."

Mrs. Trotter accepted the invitation. She went to the big double bed, sat down, and found it sinfully soft. The bedroom was a room resplendent in pinks and pale blues, with a shaggy beige carpet. Sharon sat at her dressing table, and began to apply her makeup with professional vigor.

"Sharon . . ."

The girl saw her mother's white face reflected in the mirror, and whirled on the bench.

"Ma! Are you okay?"

"Sharon—something's happened. Something terrible—"

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"While you were in the shower, the telephone rang. I—I tried to call you, but you couldn't hear me. I picked it up—I thought I would take a message. He didn't give me a chance. He started talking so fast—"

"Who did? Ben?"

"Yes. Ben. He told me—told me that his wife died last night—"

"*What?*" Sharon stood up, and a box of powder seemed to explode on the bedroom floor.

"He said that his wife is dead. He said the police know about you and him. He wants you to tell the police that he—" She couldn't keep it up; tears choked her speech.

"Ma, please!"

"My poor baby!" Mrs. Trotter sobbed. "It's not your fault. It was *him*. He'll drag you down with him. That's what he'll do!"

"But what did he *say*?"

"He killed her, Sharon! Can't you see that? He killed his wife! And now he'll get *you* in a mess—"

"Ma, get hold of yourself!" The crisis had hardened Sharon's face. "What did Ben say? What does he want me to tell the police?"

Mrs. Trotter wiped the moisture from her puffy cheeks. She reached out, touched her daughter's hand, and Mrs. Trotter's face underwent a subtle transformation. Her other hand wandered to the blonde hair, and pushed it lovingly back from the forehead to reveal the girl's wide eyes. She searched them, as if seeking for the child that had once lived behind them. Her chin went up, and her speech became dry and clear.

"He wants you to tell the police," Mrs. Trotter said, "that he wasn't here last night. Understand? He *wasn't* here."

Sharon nodded, her lips set.

On the other side of the front door a thick finger pushed hard on the buzzer.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **REX STOUT**

TITLE: ***Immune to Murder***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Nero Wolfe

LOCALE: The Adirondacks, New York State

COMMENTS: *Nero Wolfe agreed to cook trout for the foreign ambassador. But when murder struck at the oil tycoon's fishing camp, Wolfe had to find the killer — simply had to — because the most likely suspect was Nero Wolfe himself!*

I STOOD WITH MY ARMS FOLDED, glaring down at Nero Wolfe, who had his 278 pounds planted in a massive armchair which was made of heavy pine slats, with thick striped rugs draped over the back and on the seat for a cushion. It went with the rest of the furniture, including the bed, in that room of River Bend, the sixteen-room mountain lodge belonging to O. V. Bragan, the oil tycoon.

"A fine way to serve your country," I told him. "*Not.* I get you here in time to be shown to your room and unpack and wash up for dinner, and now you tell me to go tell your host you want dinner in your room. Nothing doing. I decline."

He was glaring back. "Confound it, I have lumbago!" he roared.

"You have not got lumbago. Naturally, your back's tired, since all the way from 35th Street, Manhattan, to the Adirondacks, 328 miles, you kept stiff on the back seat, ready to jump, even with me at the wheel. What you need is exercise, like a good, long walk to the dining room."

"I say it's lumbago."

"No. It's acute mooditis, which is a medical term for an inflamed whim." I unfolded my arms to gesture. "Here's the situation: We were getting nowhere on that insurance case for Lamb and McCullough, which I admit was annoying for the

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greatest detective alive, and you were plenty annoyed, when a phone call came from the State Department. A new ambassador from a foreign country with which our country wanted to make a deal had been asked if he had any special personal desires, and he had said yes, he wanted to catch an American brook trout, and, what was more, he wanted it cooked fresh from the brook by Nero Wolfe. Pierre Mondor of Paris had told him once that you're the ninth best cook in the world, and that the best trout he ever ate was cooked by you. Would you be willing to oblige? Arrangements had been made for the ambassador and a small party to spend a week at a lodge in the Adirondacks, with three miles of private trout water on the Crooked River. If a week was too much for you, two days would do, or even one, or even, in a pinch, just long enough to cook some trout."

I gestured again. "Okay. You asked me what I thought. I said we had to stay on the Lamb and McCullough job. You said our country wanted that ambassador softened up and you must answer our country's call to duty. I said nuts. I said if you wanted to cook for our country you could enlist in the Army and work your way up to mess sergeant, but I would admit that the Lamb and McCullough thing was probably too tough for you. Days passed. It got tougher. The outcome was that we left the house at 11:14 this morning, and here we are. The setup is marvelous and very democratic. You're just here as a cook, and look at this room you've got."

I swept a hand around. "Not a hardship in sight. Mine is somewhat smaller, but I'm only cook's assistant. We were told dinner at 6:30 because they have to get up early to go fishing, and it is now 6:34, and I am instructed to go tell Bragan you'll eat in your room. If you've got lumbago, it's not in your back; it's in your psyche. It is called psychic lumbago. The best treatment—"

"Archie. Stop gibbering!" He put his hands on the chair arms.

"Yes, sir."

"There are degrees of discomfort, and some of them stop short of torment, thank heaven. Very well." He levered himself upright, making some faces, assorted, on the way. "It *is* lumbago. And with it I am to sit at a strange table with a jumble of strangers. Are you coming?"

He headed for the door. . . .

There was a hardship after all: The lodge had no dining room. Or maybe there was one; but the assorted heads of deer and bear on the walls, with planked fish here and there, made it also a trophy room; the billiard table at one end made it a game room; the cabinets of weapons and rods made it a gun and tackle room; the chairs and scattered tables made it a living room; and the over-all size made it a barn.

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There was nothing wrong with the food, which was served by two male experts in uniform, but I darn' near roasted. There were nine of us at the big, square table, with three seated at each of three sides, and no one at the side nearest the fireplace. The fireplace was twelve feet wide, and from a distance it was cheerful and sporty, with flame curling around the eight-foot logs, but my seat at a forward corner of the table was not at a distance. I had to twist my legs around to the left to keep my pants from blazing up, and my right cheek was about ready for basting. As the soup was being served I twisted the legs still further, and my foot nicked the ankle of my neighbor to the left.

"Sorry," I told him. "What's the name of that animal that can live in fire?"

"Salamander." He was a gravelly tenor, a wiry little specimen with black hair slicked back, and broad, bulgy shoulders away out of proportion to the rest of him. "What," he asked, "are you doing here?"

"Frying." I turned my head square to him to give my cheek a break. "Please remember this, these may be my last words. My name is Archie Goodwin, and I came here by invitation to bring fourteen things: parsley, onions, chives, chervil, tarragon, fresh mushrooms, brandy, bread crumbs, fresh eggs, paprika, tomatoes, cheese, and Nero Wolfe. That's only thirteen, so I must have left out one. They are ingredients of baked brook trout Montbarry, except the last; Mr. Wolfe is not exactly an ingredient."

He giggled. "I hope not. It would be a very greasy dish, yes?"

"No. That's not fat; it's solid muscle. You should see him lift a pen to sign a letter—absolutely effortless. What are you doing here?"

He tackled his soup and kept at it, but when his cup was empty he turned to me: "I am an expert, a financier, and a man of guile. I am here—"

"The name first, please. I didn't catch it."

"Certainly. Forgive me. Nicholas Papps. I am here with my friend, Mr. Theodore Kelefy, the Ambassador, to advise him on technical aspects of his mission. I am also here to catch trout, and in the four days we've been here I have caught 38. Eleven this morning—much better than the Ambassador, who got only three. It is claimed that your eastern brook trout is the most savory of all on earth, but I am reserving my opinion until I have tasted one prepared by Mr. Wolfe. Did you say onions?"

"Don't worry," I assured him. "He just waves one at the pan. Do you give advice only to ambassadors, or could I have a little? About these people. The introductions were a little skimpy."

We were interrupted by a servitor with a platter of roast beef, but after that had been attended to, he briefed me around the table, keeping his

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tenor down. O. V. Bragan, the host, was at the best side in the center, the one farthest from the fire. He was a burly six-footer with cold and sharp gray eyes and a square, bony chin, somewhere between Wolfe and me in age, and in our brief exchange with him on arrival I had felt no impulse to switch to Hemoco gas, a product of the Hemisphere Oil Co., of which he was it.

Sharing the best side with him, on his right, was Theodore Kelefy, the Ambassador. Short but broad, a little pudgy, with no neck to speak of, he looked as if he had been taking on a deep tan for ten years, but it could have been for ten generations. He thought he spoke English, and maybe he did know the words, but he could have used some advice from Nicholas Papps on how to pronounce them.

On Bragan's other side, his left, was David M. Leeson. If you had looked him over and had listened to him—his cool, professional smile, his cool, cultivated baritone, his cool, well-kept, and well-handled face—you would have guessed he was a career diplomat—he was an attaché in the State Department—and you would have hit it right on the nose. It was he who had phoned Wolfe to ask him to cook for his country. Leeson had been, Nicholas Papps told me, an embassy secretary for a couple of years in the capital which Ambassador Kelefy came from.

It helps a career diplomat to have a helpful wife, and, according to Papps, Leeson had one. Papps spoke highly of her, keeping his voice down because she was there on the other side of him, between him and the Ambassador. I had no serious objection to her looks, but she had too much forehead for a top rating. Smooth, fair skin, light-brown hair, quick blue eyes—that was all very well—but another trouble was the mouth. It had probably started out all right, but something had pulled the corners down. Either she had got bitter about something or she was working too hard on the career. If she had been a little younger I wouldn't have minded finding out which it was and suggesting steps.

The other woman at the table didn't need any suggestions. At the opposite side of the table, kitty-cornered from me, was Adria Kelefy, not the Ambassador's daughter, as might have been thought, but his wife. Small and dark and dainty, with sleepy dark eyes and silky black hair, she was unquestionably fit to pick up and carry somewhere, if only to a drug store to buy her a soda, though I doubt if that would have been her idea of a treat.

Leeson was on her right and Nero Wolfe on her left, and she was going great with both of them. Once she put her hand on Wolfe's arm and kept it there ten seconds, and he didn't pull away. Considering two of his strongest feelings, one about physical contacts and the other about women, I decided it was my duty to get close enough to study her.

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But that had to wait. Next to Wolfe, across from me, was the ninth and last, a tall, skinny guy with a perpetual squint and a thin, tight mouth that was just a hyphen between his bony jaws. His left cheek was four shades redder than his right one, which I understood and sympathized with. The fireplace, on my right, was on his left. His name, Papps said, was James Arthur Ferris. I said he must be something scrubby, like a valet or a varlet, since he had been stuck in the other baking seat.

Papps giggled. "Not a valet—not at all. A very important man, Mr. Ferris. Mr. Bragan would as soon have invited a cobra, but since he had maneuvered to get the Ambassador and Mr. Leeson here, I thought it only fair that Mr. Ferris should be invited too, and I insisted. Also, I am a man of malice. It entertains me to see a big man like Mr. Bragan displaying bad blood just because he is thwarted. You say you are frying. Why are you frying? Because the table is too close to the fire. Why was it placed too close to the fire? So Mr. Bragan could seat Mr. Ferris where he would be highly uncomfortable. No little man is ever as petty as a big man."

My plate empty, I arranged my knife and fork on it according to Hoyle. "What makes Ferris important?"

"He represents big interests—a syndicate of five great oil companies. That is why Mr. Bragan would like to scorch him. Hundreds of millions are at stake. These four days here, we have fished in the morning, squabbled in the afternoon, and fraternized in the evening. Mr. Ferris has gained some ground with the Ambassador, but not, I fear, with Mr. Leeson. In the end, however, the decision will, in effect, be mine, and I invite a situation that should mean another ten or twenty million for the government that employs me. If you think I am indiscreet you are wrong. If you repeat what I have said to Mr. Wolfe, and it goes from him to any or all of the others, including Mr. Leeson, I would not reproach you as a chatterbox. I am a man of simple candor. In fact, I would go so far as—"

I didn't get to hear how far a man of guile and malice and simple candor would go, on account of an interruption. James Arthur Ferris suddenly shoved his chair back, marched the length of the room, and took a billiard cue from the rack. All heads turned to him, and probably I wasn't alone with my notion that he was going to march back and take a swing at our host, but he merely put the cue ball on the head spot and smashed it into the cluster. The heads turned to Bragan, and I grabbed the opportunity. Bragan's scorching Ferris was nothing to me, but scorching me, too, was uncalled-for, and here was my chance.

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I got up and went to the billiard table and asked Ferris politely, "Shall I rack 'em up and we'll lag for the break?"

He was too mad to speak. He just nodded.

A couple of hours later, going on ten o'clock, Nero Wolfe said to me, "Archie. About your leaving the dinner table. You know what I think of any disturbance at a meal."

"Yes, sir."

We were in his room, bound for bed. Mine was down the hall, and I had stopped in at his by request.

"I concede," he said, "that there may be exceptions, and this was one. Mr. Bragan is either a dunce or a ruffian."

"Or both. At least, I wasn't tied to a stake—I must remember to thank him. . . . You going fishing tomorrow?"

"You know I'm not." Seated, he grunted as he bent over to unlace his shoes. That done, he straightened. "I inspected the kitchen and equipment, and it will serve. They'll be back at 11:30. I'll take over the kitchen at ten. The cook is civil and fairly competent. I wish to make an avowal. You were right to oppose this expedition. These people are engaged in bitter and savage combat, with Ambassador Kelefy at the center of it, and in his present humor I doubt if he could distinguish between trout Montbarry and carp fried in lard. As for the others, their mouths would water only at the prospect of long pig. Do you know what that is?"

I nodded. "Cannibal stew. Only, each one would want to pick the pig."

"No doubt." He kicked his shoes off. "If we leave after lunch, say 3 o'clock, will we be home by bedtime?"

I said sure, and told him good night. As I opened the door he spoke to my back: "By the way, it is not lumbago."

The next morning at 9:30 Wolfe and I had breakfast together at a little table in the big room. The five fishermen had gone off before 8 o'clock, each to his assigned stretch of the three miles of private water.

I had my own personal fishing program and had cleared it with our host the evening before. The five anglers were due back at the lodge at 11:30, leaving the whole three miles vacant. Wolfe didn't intend to join them at the lunch table anyhow, and certainly I wouldn't be missed. I would have two hours of it, and Bragan told me, though not very cordially, to help myself to tackle and waders from the cabinets and drawers.

After breakfast I offered to go and help in the kitchen, but Wolfe said I would only be in the way; so I went to the cabinets and started poking around. That was quite a collection, considering that five men had already helped themselves, presumably to the best. I finally ended up with

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a three-piece rod and a reel, tapered leaders, a fly box with two dozen assorted flies, a 14-inch willow creel, an aluminum-frame net, and waders. Assaying at around four hundred bucks on the hoof, I went to the kitchen and got three roast-beef sandwiches and a pair of chocolate bars and stowed them in the creel.

Not bothering to take off the waders, I moseyed outdoors for a look at the sky and a feel of the wind. It was a fine day, maybe too fine for good fishing, with a few white clouds floating high above the pines. The river curved around the lodge in almost a full semicircle, with the lodge's main veranda facing the big bulge of the curve. I found myself faced with a problem in etiquette. Toward one end of the veranda, ten yards to my left, was seated Adria Kelefy, reading a magazine. Towards the other end, ten yards to my right, was seated Sally Leeson, her chin propped on her fist, gazing across the veranda rail at nature. Neither had paid me any visible or audible attention. The problem was, should I wish them good morning, and, if so, which was first?

I passed. If they wanted a snubbing contest, okay. But I thought they might as well realize the kind of man they were snubbing, so I acted. There were no trees between the veranda and the river—which wasn't a river at all, merely a creek. From the assortment on the veranda I took an aluminum chair with a canvas seat, carried it down the steps and across the clearing, put it on a level spot ten feet from the creek's edge, put a Gray Hackle on the leader, sat in the chair, whipped a little line out, and dropped the fly onto the ripples.

If you ask whether I expected a hit in that unlikely piece of riffle, the answer is yes. I figured that a guy who went to that much trouble to put on an act for two women who had snubbed him deserved some cooperation from a mature male trout, and if he deserved it why shouldn't he get it? I might have, too, if Junior hadn't come along and spoiled it. About the twentieth cast my eyes caught a tiny flash and my fingers felt the take, and there I was with Junior on. I gave him the air immediately, hoping he would flop off, but he had it good. If it had been Daddy I could have tired him out, swung him in to me, and taken him off the hook with a dry hand, since he would soon be on the menu, but that little cuss had to be put back with a wet hand. So I had to leave the chair, to dip a hand in the creek before I touched him, which ruined the act.

As I put him back where he belonged, having taught him a lesson, the sound of steps came, and a voice:

"I didn't know you could fish like that from a chair! Where is it?" She said "feesh."

"Good morning, Mrs. Kelefy. I put it back. Too small."

"Oh!" She had reached me. "Let

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me." She put out a hand. "I'm going to catch one."

She looked fully as portable in the strong daylight as she had at night, and the dark eyes just as sleepy. When a woman has eyes like that, a man with any scientific instinct at all wants to find out what it takes to light them up. But a glance at my wrist told me I would be shoving off in eighteen minutes, not time enough to start on research, especially with Sally Leeson sitting there on the veranda gazing, apparently now, at us.

I shook my head. "It would be fun to see you catch a fish," I told her, "but I can't give you this rod because it isn't mine. Mr. Bragan lent it to me, and I'm sure he'll lend you one. I'm sorry. To show you how sorry I am, would you care to know one thing I thought as I looked at you last evening at the dinner table?"

"I want to catch a fish. I never saw a fish caught before." She actually reached to close her fingers on the rod.

I held on. "Mr. Bragan will be here any minute."

"If you give it to me I'll let you tell me what you thought last evening."

I shrugged. "I'm not sure I remember it, anyhow. Skip it."

No spark in the eyes. But her hand left the rod and her voice changed a little, person to person: "Of course you remember. What was it?"

"Let's see—how did it go? Oh, yes. That big, green thing in the ring on your husband's left hand—is it an emerald?"

"Certainly."

"I thought it might be. So I was thinking your husband should display his assets more effectively. With those two assets, the emerald and you, he should have combined them. The best way would be an earring on your right ear, with nothing on the left ear. I had a notion to suggest it to him."

She shook her head. "I wouldn't like it. I like pearls." She reached again for a hold on the rod. "Now I'll catch a fish."

It looked as if we were headed for a tussle, but an arrival broke it up. James Arthur Ferris, his lanky length fully accoutered, approached, speaking:

"Good morning, Mrs. Kelefy! A glorious day, glorious!"

"I want to catch a fish," Mrs. Kelefy told him, "and this man won't give me his rod. I'll take yours."

"Of course," he gushed. "With great pleasure. I have a Blue Dun on, but if you'd rather try something else—"

I was on my way.

The general run of the creek—all right, river, then—was to the north, but of course it did a lot of twisting and dodging, as shown on a big wall map at the lodge. The three miles of private water were divided into five equal stretches for solo fishing, with

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the boundaries of the stretches marked by numbered stakes. Two of the stretches were to the south of the lodge, upstream, and the other three to the north, downstream. As arranged the evening before, for that day Nicholas Papps and Ambassador Kelefy had the two to the south, and Ferris, Leeson, and Bragan the three to the north.

I am not a dry-fly man, and am no big thrill with a wet fly, so the idea was to start at the upper end and fish downstream. I headed south on the trail, which, according to the map, more or less ignored the twists of the river and was fairly straight. Less than 50 paces from the lodge I met Nicholas Papps, who greeted me with no apparent malice and lifted the lid of his creel to show me seven beauties averaging well over ten inches. A quarter of a mile farther on, here came Ambassador Kelefy, who was going to be a little late getting back, but nevertheless also had to show me. He had eight, and was pleased to hear that he was one up on Papps.

Starting at the southern boundary of Stretch One, I fished back down to the lodge in forty minutes. I prefer to report that forty minutes in bare statistics: Number of flies tried, three. Slip and fall, getting wet above the waders, one. Snags of hooks on twigs of overhang, four. Caught, one big enough to keep and five put back.

When I reached the lodge it was just 12:30, lunchtime, and I detoured around it to hit Stretch Three a hundred yards down—the stretch Ferris had fished that morning. There my luck picked up, and in twenty minutes I got three fat ones —one over twelve inches and the other two not much under that. Soon after that I came to a stake with a "4" on it, the start of Leeson's stretch. It was a nice spot, so I sat down on a rock and got out my sandwiches and chocolate.

But I had told Wolfe I would be back by 2 o'clock, and there was still more than a mile of water to try, so I crammed the grub in and resumed. For the next couple of hundred yards the growth on the banks made it all wading, and the water wasn't the kind trout like to loaf in. But then came a double bend with a long eddy hugging one shore, and I took a stance in the middle, got 40 feet of line out, dropped the fly—a Black Gnat—at the top of the eddy, and let it float down.

It hadn't gone two feet when Grandpa hit, and I jerked. I had him on, and here he came, upstream, straight for me. When he was nearly close enough to bite me he suddenly made a U turn and off he went, back into the eddy, right on through it, and around the second bend. Not having a mile of line, I went splashing after him without stopping to test footholds, up to my knees and then to my thighs and then to my knees again, until I could see around the bend. It was a straight piece of rough water, dotted with boulders,

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and I was heading for one to use as a brace in the current when I saw something that halted me.

Keeping a bent rod on Grandpa, I worked over to a boulder near the bank. It was David M. Leeson. He was lying on his back in the water, lodged among some rocks. The force of the current was gently bobbing him up and down, so that one moment his face was visible and the next moment it wasn't. I had to choose between Leeson and Grandpa. Leeson won.

Even one brief glimpse of the face was enough to answer the main question, but there is always the chance in a million; so I stooped and gripped the collar of Leeson's jacket and lifted his head clear of the water, and took a look. That was enough. Even if he wasn't drowned he wasn't alive. I backed him up slowly out onto the bank, taking him along, and let him down so that his shoulders touched the ground. I took another look at Leeson's head, and when I moved him a little farther from the water, I put my handkerchief under it so it wouldn't be in contact with the ground. Then I took my rod apart and looked at my watch. Twenty past 1.

That was all right; the trout Montbarry would be gone by the time I got there. Wolfe would never let me hear the last of it if I arrived in the middle of that particular meal to announce a corpse. I hit the trail, with the rod in one hand and the creel in the other.

It was a lot quicker to the lodge by the trail than it had been wading down. As I emerged from the trees into the clearing I saw that lunch was over, for they were all out on the veranda having coffee—the four men and two women.

As I mounted the steps, Bragan called to me, "Goodwin! Did you see Mr. Leeson anywhere?"

"No." I kept going.

"Didn't you fish his stretch?"

"Only part of it." I halted long enough to add, "I've got to get out of these waders," and then went on.

I found Wolfe's door standing open, and entered. He was putting things in his suitcase.

"You're early," he grunted. "Satisfactory."

"Yes, sir. I've got four trout to take back to Fritz, as promised. How was the lunch?"

"Passable. I cooked twenty trout and they were all eaten. I'm nearly packed, and we can go. Now."

"Yes, sir. First I have a report: About three-quarters of a mile downstream I found Leeson lying on his back in the water. He had been there some time; his armpits were good and cold."

"Good heavens!" Wolfe was scowling at me. "You would. Drowned?"

"I don't know. I—"

"You have told Mr. Bragan?"

"No, sir. I'm reporting to you. I removed it from the water to the bank. His skull was smashed in, back of the right ear and above it, by a blow or blows, I would say

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with a rock or a heavy club. Not from a fall, not a chance, unless he climbed to the top of a high tree to fall from, and there's none there high enough. Somebody clobbered him. So I thought you should be present when I announce it, preferably with your eyes open."

"Pfui. You think he was murdered?"

"Twenty to one, at least."

The scowl deepened. "Very well. They'll find him soon. They thought he was being stubborn about filling his creel and decided to go and look for him after lunch. Since he was mostly under water you didn't have to see him—no, confound it, you took him out. Even so, get those things off and dress. We are leaving. I don't intend—"

"No, sir." I was firm. "As you say, I took him out. They know I fished that stretch. We probably would get stopped somewhere around Albany and brought back, and then where would we spend the night? One guess."

He took in air, a sigh that filled him clear down to his waistline. When it was out again he blurted savagely, "Why did you have to go fishing?" He sighed again. "Go and tell Mr. Bragan."

"Yes, sir. You're coming along?"

"No! Why should I? I am not concerned. Go!"

When I got to the veranda three of the men—Bragan, Ferris, and Papps—had left it and were crossing the clearing to the trail, and I sung out: "Bragan! You three come back here, please?"

He called, astonished, "What for? We're going to find Leeson!"

"I already found him. Come here and I'll tell you."

Wolfe may not have cared about seeing their faces as I gave them the news, but I did. All of them. I ignored Bragan's demands until the three of them had mounted the steps and were facing me in a group that included Ambassador Kelefy and the two women.

"I did see Mr. Leeson," I told them. "I went to tell Mr. Wolfe first because I thought he might want to tell you, but he leaves it to me. Leeson is dead." I stopped.

Sally Leeson started to tremble as she stared at me. Adria Kelefy's mouth fell open. Ferris and Ambassador Kelefy made noises, and Bragan demanded: "Dead? How? Where?"

"I found his body on the riverbank, with most of him in the water, including the back of his head. I lifted him out, but he had been dead sometime." I focused on Bragan: "You'll get a doctor, of course, but also you'll have to get the police, and the body must not be moved again until they come, because—"

Sally Leeson gave a little whimpering cry and made a dash for the steps. I grabbed her and got my arms around her. "Hold on a minute," I told her, "and I'll take you there if you have to go. Just hold on."

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"Why the police?" Bragan demanded.

"His skull is smashed. Don't argue with me; save it for them. I'm going back to the body and stay there till they come. Shall I call them first?"

"No. I will."

"Good. It's at the double bend two hundred yards below the Number Four stake." I loosened my grip on the widow, and she was stiff and straight. "You'd better stay here, Mrs. Leeson."

"No. I must . . . take me."

"Then I'd just as soon have someone along. Ferris?"

"No."

"Kelefy?"

"I think not."

"Papps?"

"Certainly," he said politely, and the three of us went.

Two hours later, at a quarter to 4, it was a convention.

Two state troopers had been the first to arrive, and Bragan had brought them down to us at the double bend. Soon afterward the doctor came. When he asked me why I had put my handkerchief under Leeson's head, and I said because I thought the water might not have washed away all evidence of what it was that had smashed the skull, he said that was very sensible and it was too bad he didn't have a good glass with him. But his main contribution was to make it official that Leeson was dead, and to insist that Mrs. Leeson let Papps take her back to the lodge. The body couldn't be moved until the sheriff came.

When the sheriff arrived he had two county detectives along. Then more troopers, including a lieutenant. Then the district attorney, a bouncy, bald guy named Jasper Colvin. He had two underlings with him. Then a couple of journalists, one with a notebook and one with a camera. They all got around to me, and they all seemed to have the idea that I was leaving something out, but that was nothing new. Any officer of the law would rather be caught dead than admit he believes that you're telling him the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but.

When a stretcher finally came for the remains, most of the public servants were scattered around looking for the weapon or other relevant items, and my offer to help carry was accepted. It was quite a load and quite a portage. After we had lifted the stretcher into an ambulance that had squeezed into the crowded parking space back of the lodge, I circled around to the veranda and found no one there but a trooper. Inside, in the big room, Ferris and Papps were on chairs by a window having a conversation. Papps called, "Anything new?"

"Not with me," I told him, and crossed to the inner hall.

Wolfe was in his room, in the big armchair with striped rugs, with a book. He shot me a glance as I entered and then went back to the book.

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I stood. "Do you want a report?"

His eyes stayed on the page. "Not unless it bears upon our leaving here."

"It doesn't. Any questions or instructions?"

"No."

"You know very well," I said pleasantly, "that you approved of my going fishing. Where are my trout?"

"In the kitchen in the large refrigerator. Cleaned."

"Thank you very much." I left him and went to my room.

I was there an hour later when a trooper came to tell me I was wanted. I supposed it was for more of the same, but Wolfe was in the hall outside his door, and started off as I approached. He led the way to the big room, with the trooper in the rear.

It looked as if something was stewing. The five guests were in a group, seated, in the middle of the room, and Bragan was standing nearby talking with District Attorney Colvin. The sheriff and two troopers were over near the door, and one of the pair the D.A. had brought with him was seated at a little table with an open notebook before him.

Wolfe stopped and raised his voice. "You sent for me, Mr. Bragan?"

Colvin answered. "I did. I'm Jasper Colvin, District Attorney of this county. You're Nero Wolfe, a private detective?"

"Yes."

"You will sit here, please. You, too, Goodwin. I have something to say to all of you."

I wouldn't have been surprised if Wolfe had marched out, since he had had three provocations: First, Colvin's tone of voice; second, his saying "*a* private detective," not "*the* private detective"; and, third, the size of the chair indicated, at the rear of the group of guests. But after a second's hesitation he went and sat, and I took the other vacant chair next to him.

The D.A. stood facing his audience. He cleared his throat. "I am sure, ladies and gentlemen, I don't need—"

"Want me to take this?" It was the man at the table with the notebook.

Colvin turned his head to snap, "Yes, everything!" and turned back. He cleared his throat again. "I don't need to tell you, ladies and gentlemen, how painful I find my duty today. I know you all appreciate that."

They didn't say.

He went on: "When I arrived here on this tragic mission, two hours ago, I found that Sheriff Dell and Lieutenant Hopp were already here. We agreed that there was no point in harassing you until certain lines of investigation had been tried, and so you were merely asked a few routine questions and requested to remain on the premises for possible further inquiry. In that connection I wish to convey the sincere thanks of myself personally, and of the

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People of the State of New York, to Ambassador Kelefy. He and his wife, and Mr. Nicholas Papps of his staff, are protected by diplomatic immunity from arrest or detention, but they have made no objection to our request. I may say that I have phoned the State Department in Washington for advice."

"That wasn't necessary," Kelefy assured him. "Even diplomats are human occasionally."

Colvin nodded at him and resumed: "But now it is my painful duty to tell you that we will have to go further than routine questions. We have had to reject the idea that Mr. Leeson's death was accidental. Two doctors agree that the injury to the skull could not have been caused by any conceivable accident at that spot. They also agree that it couldn't possibly have been self-inflicted. Therefore, it was homicide."

The only one who moved was James Arthur Ferris. He turned his head for a glance at Sally Leeson.

O. V. Bragan spoke up: "I told you when you got here it might be murder. I reminded you and the troopers that I've been bothered with poachers on my water, and I suggested that you immediately start your men investigating the possibility that Leeson came on one at the river and was attacked by him. Did you do that?"

Colvin cleared his throat. "We didn't overlook that possibility, Mr. Bragan, but permit me to finish. An examination of the skull wound with a magnifying glass disclosed three particles of wood bark that had not been dislodged by the water. That justified the assumption that the blow or blows had been struck with a wooden club. If so, where was it? It wasn't at or near the spot. It seemed unlikely that the assailant had carried it away. Probably he had thrown it from him, and, most probably, he had thrown it in the river. And it has been found—or I should say, a club has been found. Bring it here, Nate."

The sheriff walked over to him and held it up. It was three feet long, maybe a little more, as thick as my arm.

"It was found," Colvin said, "in the river five hundred feet downstream from the bend, wedged between two rocks where the current had carried it. It's ash. The water was playing over it, but the bark wasn't soaked through, so it hadn't been there very long. As you see, it was sawed off at both ends. Near one end the bark is bruised for three inches as if it had hit something hard. It will take a microscope to find out if the water left any evidence in the bruised bark, but we think we are justified in assuming that that club was the weapon. And you must permit me, Mr. Bragan, you must permit me to say that if Mr. Leeson surprised a poacher on your water, I can conceive of no reason why the poacher was carrying such a club. Sheriff Dell and Lieutenant Hopp agree with me."

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"You don't have to conceive his reason," Bragan rumbled. "Find him and ask him."

"That is a possibility," the D.A. conceded. "Two of the sheriff's men and two troopers are now exploring it. But one more fact: There are two large stacks of firewood outside on your premises. One of them is eight-foot logs for your big fireplace. The other is shorter and smaller logs for the smaller fireplaces in your other rooms, and in it are scores, hundreds, of pieces of ash similar to the one the sheriff has just shown you. There is no stack of wood like that within two miles or more. So, believe me, Mr. Bragan, we have been forced to our conclusion. We don't like it—we don't like it at all—but duty is duty no matter how painful it is. Our conclusion is that Mr. Leeson was killed with that club by premeditation, that the club came from your woodpile, and that it was used by someone here at your place. Is that right, Nate?"

"That's the way I see it," the sheriff declared.

Bragan was leaning forward. "You're actually saying that I or one of my guests murdered Mr. Leeson? And you know who my guests are?"

"I certainly do," Colvin said. "But there are two of them who may have reason to—" He stopped. "No." He turned to the man with the notebook. "Strike out that last sentence."

"Okay." The man scratched with his pen.

Colvin resumed: "I am keenly aware of the situation, Mr. Bragan, but the inquiry must be proper and, of course, unprejudiced. It may be necessary later to talk with one or more of you privately, but I think it's better to start this way, with you first, naturally. For the record I ask you, did you strike Leeson with that club or any other weapon?"

"No. Good heavens, man! No!"

"Have you any reason whatever to suspect any person present of having done so?"

"No. None."

Colvin's eyes moved. "Those two questions are *pro forma* for each and all of you. You have heard them and will please answer them. . . . Mrs. Leeson?"

"No." Her voice was low. "To both."

"Mrs. Kelefy?"

"One moment," Ferris put in. "To put such questions to the wife of a distinguished foreign ambassador is highly improper."

I would have liked to ask if it would be okay to put them to the wife of an undistinguished foreign ambassador, but skipped it. Anyway, the distinguished ambassador was speaking:

"This is no time to seek refuge in propriety. Answer, my dear."

"But of course," she said. "Certainly *no* to both questions."

"Ambassador Kelefy, if you wish to answer?"

"I do. I answer *no*."

"Mr. Papps?"

"No and *no*."

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"Mr. Ferris?"
"No to both."
"Nero Wolfe?"
"No to both."
"Goodwin?"
"I've been asked before. No again."

Colvin's eyes went right and left. "You were asked previously when and where you last saw Mr. Leeson alive, but in the present circumstances I would like to verify it. Ambassador Kelefy and Mr. Papps, whose stretches were south, upstream, last saw him when they parted from him on the veranda shortly before eight o'clock this morning. Mrs. Leeson last saw him when he left their room this morning to go to breakfast. Mrs. Kelefy last saw him last evening when she and her husband left this room to go to bed. Mr. Ferris last saw him on the trail, when Mr. Ferris left the trail to strike the river and start fishing his stretch, Number Three. Mr. Leeson and Mr. Bragan continued on the trail, and Mr. Bragan last saw Mr. Leeson when he left the trail for the river at the beginning of his stretch, Number Four. Mr. Bragan continued on the trail to the boundary of his water, to fish stretch Number Five. Wolfe and Goodwin last saw him last evening in this room.

"That's the way we have it; that's what you've told us. I now ask each and all of you, is that correct in every particular? Correct not only as regards yourself, but as regards the others? If not, tell me."

Not a peep.

Colvin took a breath. "Mr. Bragan, it is necessary to ask you this: There was a piece in the paper day before yesterday, a dispatch from Washington, about this fishing party at your lodge. It said that Ambassador Kelefy's chief purpose in his new post would be to carry on negotiations regarding oil rights in his country, that vast sums were involved, and that he had brought Mr. Nicholas Papps with him for that purpose; that Mr. Leeson was included in the party because he knew Ambassador Kelefy, having formerly been an attaché of our embassy in the Ambassador's country; and that the negotiations might be brought to a conclusion on the bank of this trout stream, since the two chief bidders for the rights were both here. The article named them: O. V. Bragan of the Hemisphere Oil Company and James Arthur Ferris of the Universal Syndicate."

"Well, what about it?"

"It said the rivalry between Hemisphere and Universal was intense and bitter—yes, it said 'bitter.' You must see that this is going to cause widespread speculation. Do you want to comment on that?"

"I do not," Bragan replied.

"It might be helpful for you to give me some idea, privately if you prefer, of the state of the negotiations. Of the nature of the relationships of all those concerned. It might help to eliminate that as—uh—as a factor."

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"It's already eliminated. You're beyond your depth, Colvin."

"You certainly are." Ferris was supporting his bitter rival. "This is preposterous. Go find the poacher."

"If I may," Ambassador Kelefy put in diplomatically. "I agree with Mr. Bragan and Mr. Ferris. Americans do not fight, even for millions, with clubs."

I could have named him an American who had used a blackjack on a fellow citizen to relieve him of $1.38, but of course he wasn't an oil tycoon.

"You're not only beyond your depth," Bragan told the D.A., "but you're too free with conclusions. Even if that club was the weapon and it came from my woodpile, and therefore it was premeditated, why was it one of us? Anyone could sneak in through the woods and get a stick from the woodpile."

"True," Colvin agreed. "Quite true. But it must have been premeditated, and Mr. Leeson must have been a chosen target. As I said, four trained men are exploring that possibility. But the laws of probability compel us to center our attention on this place and the people here. By no means exclusively on you and your five guests; there are five others. Wolfe, Goodwin, and your three servants. The three servants have been questioned, and we're certainly not through with them. I want to ask you about them. The cook's name is Michael Samek?"

"Yes. This is ridiculous. Mike has been with me for fifteen years, and—"

"Isn't that a Russian name? Is he a Russian?"

"No. He's an American. You certainly are seeing things, Colvin. He was born in Buffalo. The other two men are from an agency in New York and I have used them many times. For years. Do you want the name of the agency?"

"We got it from them. Have you any reason whatever to suppose that one of those three might be involved in this?"

"I have not. I have every reason to suppose they aren't."

"All right, but you understand they have to be thoroughly checked. . . . Now, about Wolfe and Goodwin. The newspaper article said that Wolfe was coming to cook trout for Ambassador Kelefy. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Did you arrange that?"

"No. Mr. Leeson did."

"Why did Goodwin come along?"

"I suppose to drive the car. Ask him."

"I intend to. But first please tell me—to your knowledge, was there anything behind that arrangement? Some other reason for getting Wolfe and Goodwin here?"

"No. Not to my knowledge."

Colvin's eyes went to Wolfe and he raised his chin and his voice: "I ask you, Wolfe. Goodwin says that the arrangement for your coming here was made on the telephone with Mr. Leeson. Have you any record other

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than your own memory of what was said on the telphone?"

If he had worked at it for a week he couldn't have thought up a worse approach.

Wolfe, beside me, sat slowly moving his head from side to side, and I thought he was simply going to clam up and let it go at that. But, no. He spoke: "It's too bad, Mr. Colvin."

"What's too bad?"

"That you're spoiling it. You people have investigated promptly and efficiently, and you have expounded the situation admirably—though I think 'assumptions' would be a better word than 'conclusions' at this stage. You even show—"

"I asked you a question! Answer it!"

"I shall. You even show commendable spunk in dealing with two billionaires and an ambassador, and I can't blame you for wanting to impress them by using a sharper tone and a more pugnacious manner for me. However, my one desire is to leave here and go home. I will make a statement. When I'm through you may ask questions, and I may answer them."

"I've asked one. You can answer that."

Wolfe shook his head patiently. "I've offered a statement. Isn't that accepted procedure?"

The sheriff, who had returned to the group by the door, called over, "Maybe he'd like it better at the courthouse!"

The D.A. ignored the sheriff. "Go ahead and make your statement," he said to Wolfe.

"Yes, sir." Wolfe was trying not to be smug. He did want to go home. "Eleven days ago I had a telephone call from Washington and was told that Mr. David M. Leeson of the State Department wished to speak with me. Mr. Leeson, whom I had never met, told me that a fishing party was being arranged for Ambassador Kelefy, newly arrived in this country, and that the Ambassador had expressed a desire to eat fresh trout cooked by Nero Wolfe, and would I oblige him? Mr. Leeson said it would be deeply appreciated. I was engaged on a difficult job and reserved my decision. Mr. Leeson phoned me again two days later, and again three days later, and I agreed to go, and he gave me the necessary information. No other matter was mentioned by either of us in any of the conversations."

"Did Leeson write you about it?"

"No. It was all arranged on the phone. Yesterday morning Mr. Goodwin and I left my house in New York and drove here in my car, arriving around 6 o'clock. He accompanied me because he always does, and I had so stipulated with Mr. Leeson. He and I dined in this room with the others, and went to our rooms and to bed about 10 o'clock. Neither of us had ever before met any of the people here, and neither of us had any private conversation with any of them, yes-

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terday or during the night. This morning we arose rather late and breakfasted together in this room at half-past 9. We were told that the others, the five men, had all gone fishing before 8 o'clock. After breakfast I went to the kitchen to start preparations for cooking lunch, and Mr. Goodwin got himself outfitted for fishing. From that point the account of Mr. Goodwin's movements will come from him; no doubt he has already furnished it. I stayed in the kitchen until luncheon had been cooked and served; I ate mine in the kitchen; and a little after 1 o'clock I went to my room and remained there until Mr. Goodwin arrived and told me he had found Mr. Leeson's body."

"What time was it—?"

"If you please. A little more. You hinted at the possibility of a connection between the attack on Mr. Leeson and the contest for the oil rights which Ambassador Kelefy is negotiating. As the investigation gets hotter I suppose you'll return to that, in private interviews, and sooner or later someone will certainly mention an incident that occurred in this room last evening at the dinner table. Mr. Goodwin might, since he was casually involved. So I mention it now: Mr. Bragan placed the table, and arranged the seating, so that Mr. Ferris and Mr. Goodwin were toasted before our eyes. Their only alternatives were discourtesy or cremation, and they chose the former; they left the table and played billiards. I don't suggest that this has any bearing on the murder; I report it only because it was a notable incident and I don't want to be reproached later for leaving it out."

Wolfe closed his eyes, and opened them again. "That's all, I think, except to add that I fully realize the pickle you're in. You are driven to the hypothesis that someone on these premises is a murderer. Eleven of us. The three servants are probably hopeless. Leaving eight. Mrs. Leeson seems highly unlikely. Leaving seven. Ambassador Kelefy, his wife, and Mr. Papps are beyond your reach even for inquisition, let alone indictment. Leaving four. Mr. Bragan and Mr. Ferris are mighty men of great wealth, dangerous to offend without the most conclusive grounds; you will provoke them at your peril. Leaving two, Mr. Goodwin and me. So I understand your eagerness to impeach us, but it's no good. Don't waste energy on us."

"Are you through?"

"Yes. If you wish a statement from Mr. Goodwin also, he—"

"We already have Goodwin's story. Naturally, it agrees with yours." The D.A.'s tone indicated no desire for peaceful coexistence. "For the record, I deny your allegation that we are eager to impeach you, as you put it. We are eager for only one thing—the truth about the commission of this crime. You say you went to the kitchen, parting from Goodwin, immediately after breakfast?"

"Yes."

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"And that was around ten o'clock?"

"Almost precisely at ten."

"When did you see him next?"

"Shortly before 11 o'clock he came to the kitchen and got sandwiches for his lunch, and left. The next time was when he came to my room and told me of finding Mr. Leeson's body."

Colvin nodded. "Around 1:30. Goodwin admits he was alone for forty minutes or more after you went to the kitchen. He says he was in this room, looking over the tackle and getting himself equipped, but he had ample time to slip out the side door, make his way to Stretch Four, find Mr. Leeson and deal with him, return, and proceed to the veranda to register his presence with Mrs. Kelefy and Mrs. Leeson. Or, as an alternative, he had reason to suppose that Leeson would stay out beyond the appointed hour, and, after starting south and meeting Mr. Papps and Ambassador Kelefy on the trail, he doubled back through the woods, detouring around the lodge, found Mr. Leeson, even possibly by arrangement, and killed him."

Wolfe's brows were up. "Had he gone mad? I grant that Mr. Goodwin sometimes acts impulsively, but that seems rather extreme."

"Murder is extreme." Colvin's voice went up a notch: "You can save your sarcasm, Wolfe. If Goodwin did it he had a motive, sure, and I can't produce it now, but there are plenty of possibilities. You like money. What if Mr. Leeson was in somebody's way, and that somebody came and offered you a big sum to help dispose of him? He knew you had been asked to come here, and that would give you and Goodwin a perfect opportunity. So you decided to come, and you did. It doesn't have to be that Goodwin suddenly went mad, or you either."

"Pfui!" Wolfe sighed. "You may indulge yourself in fantastic nonsense, but don't pester me with it. Let's be explicit: Are you calling me a liar?"

"I am!"

"Then there's no point in going on." Wolfe left his chair. "I'll be in my room, with no interest in any further communication except word that I may leave for home. Since you already have Mr. Goodwin's story, you won't need him, either. . . . Come, Archie." He moved.

"Wait a minute!" Colvin commanded. "I'm not through with you! Is your statement absolutely complete?"

Wolfe, having taken a step, halted and turned his head. "Yes."

"You included a notable incident. That's what you called it. Was there any other notable incident that you didn't mention?"

"No. None that I know about."

"Then you don't call it notable that you came here to cook trout for Ambassador Kelefy—that's what you came for—and when they brought in their creels today and you and the cook cleaned the trout, you did

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not include the trout in Ambassador Kelefy's creel—the trout he had caught, himself? You don't call that notable?"

Wolfe shrugged. "Not especially."

"Well, I do." Colvin was bearing down. "The cook, Samek, says that the creels were tagged with the names. You selected the fish from them. Ferris's had nine, and you used six. Papps's had seven, and you used five. Ambassador Kelefy's had eight, all of good size, and you didn't use one of them. They were still there in the kitchen and Samek showed them to me. Nothing wrong with them as far as I could see. Do you deny this?"

"Oh, no." I caught a little gleam in Wolfe's eye. "But will you tell me how it relates to the crime you're investigating?"

"I don't know. But I call it a notable incident, and you didn't mention it." Colvin's head moved. "Ambassador Kelefy, did you know that Wolfe didn't cook any of the fish you caught?"

"No, Mr. Colvin, I didn't. This is rather a surprise."

"Do you know of any reason for it?"

"I'm afraid not." Kelefy swiveled his head for a glance at Wolfe. "No doubt Mr. Wolfe can supply one."

"He certainly can. . . . What about it, Wolfe? Why?"

Wolfe shook his head. "Relate it to the murder, Mr. Colvin. I shouldn't withhold evidence, of course, but I'm not; the trout are there; scrutinize them, send them to the nearest laboratory for full analysis. I resent your manners and your methods. Only a witling would call a man with my conceit a liar. . . . Come, Archie."

I can't say how it would have developed if there hadn't been a diversion. As Wolfe made for the door to the hall with me at his heels, the sheriff, the lieutenant, and the other trooper came trotting across to head us off, and they succeeded, since Wolfe had neither the build nor the temperament to make a dash for it. But only two of them blocked the doorway, because, as they came, the phone rang and the lieutenant changed course to go to the table and answer it.

After a word he turned to say to the D.A., "For you, Mr. Colvin. Attorney General Jessel."

Colvin went to get it, leaving us stuck in tableaux. The conversation wasn't long, and he had the short end of it.

When he hung up he turned and said, "That was Mr. Herman Jessel, Attorney General of the State of New York. I phoned him just before calling you together here and described the situation. He is leaving Albany immediately to come here, and wants me to postpone further questioning of you ladies and gentlemen until he arrives. That will probably be around 8 o'clock. Meanwhile, you are requested to remain inside the lodge here or on the veranda. . . ."

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Wolfe sat in the big armchair in his room, leaning back, his eyes closed, his lips compressed. I stood at a window, looking out. Wolfe's voice sounded behind me: "What time is it?"

"Twenty after five." I turned.

"Where would we be if we had left at 2 o'clock?"

"On Route 22, four miles south of Hoosick Falls."

"Bosh. You can't know that."

"That's what I do know. What I don't know is why you didn't let the Ambassador eat his trout."

"Thirty-four were caught. I cooked twenty. That's all."

"Okay, save it. What I don't know won't hurt me. I'll tell you what I think. I think the guy that sent us here to kill Leeson was sending you messages by putting them inside trout and tossing the trout in the river, and some of them were in the ones Kelefy caught, and you had to wait for a chance to get them out when the cook wasn't looking, and when—"

There was a knock at the door and I went and opened it, and O. V. Bragan, our host, stepped in. No manners. When I shut the door and turned he was already across to Wolfe and talking:

"I want to ask you about something."

Wolfe opened his eyes. "Yes, Mr. Bragan? Don't stand on ceremony. Indeed, don't stand at all. Looking up at people disconcerts me. Archie?"

I moved a chair up for the burly six-footer, expecting no thanks, and getting none. But since Wolfe had taken a crack at him about ceremony I thought I might as well too, and told him not to mention it. He didn't hear me.

His cold and sharp gray eyes were leveled at Wolfe. "I like the way you handled Colvin," he stated.

Wolfe grunted. "I didn't. I want to go home. When I talk with a man who is in a position to give me something I want, and I don't get it, I have blundered. I should have toadied him. Vanity comes high."

"He's a fool."

"I don't agree." Obviously, Wolfe was in no mood to agree with anyone or anything. "I thought he did moderately well. His stand with Mr. Ferris and you was almost intrepid."

"Bah! He's a fool. The idea that anyone here would deliberately murder Leeson is so absurd that only a fool would take it seriously."

"Not as absurd as the idea that a poacher, with a club from your woodpile as a cane, was struck with the fancy of using it as a deadly weapon. Discovered, poachers don't kill; they run."

"All right, it wasn't a poacher." Bragan was brusque. "And it wasn't anyone here. But heaven knows what this is going to mean to my plans. If it isn't cleared up in a hurry, anything can happen. With Leeson murdered here at my lodge, the State Department could decide to freeze me out, and not only that—

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Ambassador Kelefy could decide he'd rather not deal with me, and that would be worse."

He hit his chair arm with a fist. "It has *got* to be cleaned up in a hurry! And it won't be, the way they're going at it. I know your reputation, Wolfe, and I want you to find out who killed Leeson."

"Sitting here?" Wolfe was bored. "Confined to the lodge and veranda? Another absurd idea."

"You wouldn't be. Jessel, the attorney general, will be here in a couple of hours. After I talk with him and he reads your statement, and questions you if he wants to, he'll let you go. I've got a plane at a landing field twelve miles from here, and you and Goodwin will fly to Washington and get busy. I'll give you some names of people there that can help, and I'll phone them from here. The way it looks to me, somebody that wanted to finish Leeson decided to do it here. You find him and pin it on him, and quick. I'm not telling you how; that's your job. Well?"

"No," Wolfe said bluntly.

"Why not?"

"I am responsible for my decisions, Mr. Bragan, but to myself, not to you. However, I am your guest. I would ride in an airplane only in desperation, and I am not desperate. Again, I want to go home, and Washington is not my home. Again, even if your assumption regarding the murder were correct, it might take so long to find him and expose him that your plans would be beyond salvage. There is a fourth reason even more cogent than those, but I'm not prepared to disclose it."

"What is it?"

"No, sir. I owe you the decent courtesy of a guest, Mr. Bragan, but that's all, and I decline the job. . . . Archie, someone at the door."

I was on my way to answer the knock. It was James Arthur Ferris. Bragan was sitting with his back to the door. When Ferris got far enough to see who it was, he stopped and blurted, "You here, Bragan? Good."

Bragan blurted back, "Why is it good?"

"Because I was coming to ask Wolfe and Goodwin for a little favor. I was going to ask them to come with me to your room and be present while I said something to you. I've learned from experience that it's advisable to have witnesses present when I'm talking with you."

"Oh, come off it." Bragan was fed up. First Wolfe turning him down flat, and now this. "A diplomat has been murdered. On every radio and TV network, and tomorrow on the front page of a thousand papers. Pull in your horns!"

Ferris, not listening apparently, was squinting down at Wolfe. "If you don't mind," he said, "I'll say it here. There's no danger that you'll ever have to testify to it or even furnish an affidavit, because Bragan hasn't got the guts to lie when he knows it's three to one. I'll appre-

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ciate the favor." He turned the squint on Bragan, and you wouldn't think his thin little hyphen of a mouth was much to show hate with, but he certainly managed it. "I just want to tell you what I'm going to do, so you can't say afterwards that it hit you without warning."

"Go ahead." Bragan's head was tilted back to face the squint. "Let's hear it."

"As you know, the attorney general is on his way here. He's going to ask about the status of our negotiations with Kelefy and Papps, and where Leeson stood. When he asks me I'm going to tell him the truth—how you had your Paris man working on Kelefy and Papps before they even left home; how you tried to get something on Papps; how you had two men I can name trying to put screws on Leeson, and—"

"Watch it, Ferris. We're not alone. You've got your witnesses."

"You bet I have. I'll probably have more when I'm talking to the attorney general. I'm going to tell him how you tried to buy Papps—buy him with cash, your stockholders' cash. How you finally swung Leeson and had him eating out of your hand. How you got him to arrange this little fishing party, here at your place, so you'd have Kelefy and Papps all to yourself. How Papps didn't like that and got me invited. And then, after we got here, how I worked you into a corner with the dirty swindle you thought you had all set, and yesterday afternoon Leeson began to see the light. It didn't need much more to cook you good—one more day would have done it. This is the day, but Leeson's not here. That's what I'm going to tell the attorney general, and I didn't want to spring it on you without warning. Also, I didn't want you to claim I had, with a big whine, so I wanted witnesses. That's all."

Ferris turned and was going. Bragan called to him but he didn't stop. He went out the door, pulling it shut as he went. Bragan looked at me without seeing me, said, "And he bought Papps, himself!" and opened the door and was gone.

I closed it and asked Wolfe, "Do I go and warn somebody? Or wait a while and then go find the body?"

"Saber-toothed hyenas," he growled.

"Okay," I agreed, "but all the same I think you missed a bet. That gook might actually be able to talk us out of here. And, in addition, you could bill Bragan for at least ten grand. You could tell him—"

"Archie."

"Yes, sir."

"There's a book on power politics on a shelf in that room. I'd like to have it."

It had long been understood that at home he got his own books off of shelves, but I had to admit this was different, so I let him tell me what book he wanted. In the big room a trooper sat over by the door. I found the book with no trouble, and handed it to Wolfe.

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"It occurs to me," he said, "that a little later they may undertake to gather at a table for a meal. In the refrigerator are a third of a ham, half of a roast turkey, milk, and beer. The bread is inedible, but in a cupboard there are some crackers, and in another cupboard a jar of blackberry jam. If you see anything else you think desirable, bring it."

He opened the book and settled back in the armchair. I wasn't through with him on the notion of letting Bragan spring us and commit himself to a fee, but I thought half an hour with a book might make him more receptive to the idea of a plane ride, so I went to the kitchen. The cook, Samek, was there. I said if he didn't mind I'd cater with a pair of trays for Wolfe and me, and he said go ahead.

As I got out a bottle of milk I said casually, "By the way, I intended to take a look at the trout the Ambassador caught. Where are they?"

"They're not here. The cops took 'em."

The loaded trays called for two trips. The second trip, with mine, I met Papps in the hall and exchanged nods with him.

After we finished our meal I returned the trays to the kitchen and headed back for the room, all set to tackle Wolfe on Bragan's proposition. My chances of selling him were about one in fifty, but I had to do something to pass the time, and why not that? Keeping him stirred up was one thing he paid me for. However, it had to be postponed. As I approached, I saw that the door was standing open, and as I entered I saw that we had more company. Adria Kelefy was sitting in the chair that I had moved up for Bragan, and the Ambassador was getting another for himself.

I got snubbed again. As I stepped around to a chair off to one side, Wolfe and Mrs. Kelefy merely glanced at me, and the Ambassador didn't even bother to glance.

He pointed to the book in Wolfe's hand. "I am well acquainted," he said, "with the theory that in the atomic age we can no longer rely on industrial potential as the dominant factor in another world war, and I think the writer of your book makes his point, but he goes too far. In spite of that, it's a good book."

Wolfe placed a slip of paper in it to mark his place—he dog's-ears his own books—and put it down. "In any event," he said, "man is a remarkable animal, with a unique distinction. Of all the millions of species rendered extinct by evolution, we are the only one to know in advance what is going to destroy us. Our own insatiable curiosity. We can take pride in that."

"Yes, indeed." Evidently Kelefy wasn't too upset at the prospect. "I had hoped, Mr. Wolfe, to offer you my thanks in happier circumstances. The death of Mr. Leeson has turned this little excursion into a tragedy, but even so, I must not neglect to

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thank you. It was most gracious of you to grant my request."

"It was a privilege and an honor," Wolfe declared. No diplomat was going to beat him at it. "To be chosen as an instrument of my country's hospitality was my good fortune. I only regret, with you, the catastrophe that spoiled it."

"Of course," the Ambassador agreed. "I thought also to tell you how I happened to make the request of Mr. Leeson. There is a man who operates a restaurant in Rome, where I was once stationed, by the name of Pasquale Donofrio. I praised his sauce with grilled kidneys, and he said you originated it. I had a similar experience in Cairo, and one in Madrid. And from my friend Leeson, when he had a post in my own capital, I heard something of your exploits as a private detective. So when, here in your country, I was asked to express a personal desire, I thought of you."

"I am gratified, sir."

"And my wife joins me in my thanks." He smiled at her.

Her dark eyes were as sleepy as ever. Apparently, it would take more than a murder to light them up. She spoke: "I insisted on coming with my husband to thank you, Mr. Wolfe. I, too, had heard much about you, and the trout was delicious. Really, the best I have ever tasted. And, another thing, I wanted to ask you, some more of our insatiable curiosity, why didn't you cook the ones my husband caught?"

"Oh, yes," Kelefy agreed. "I wanted to ask that, too."

"Caprice," Wolfe said. "Mr. Goodwin will tell you that I am a confirmed eccentric."

"Then you really cooked none of mine?"

"That seems to be established."

"But it's rather fantastic, since it was at my request that you were here. Even a caprice must spring from something."

"Not necessarily, sir." Wolfe was patient. "A whim, a fancy, a freakish dart of the mind."

The Ambassador persisted: "I apologize for dwelling on this, but I would like to avoid any chance of embarrassment. Mr. Colvin made rather a point of it, probably in his eagerness to get at you, and it would be most unfortunate if it got into the public reports. In a *cause célèbre*, and this will certainly be one, any unexplained fact gives rise to all kinds of wild rumors, and in this instance they will concern me, only because it was the trout I caught that you didn't cook! It's true that that has no conceivable connection with the murder of Mr. Leeson, but the gossips will do their best to invent one, and the position of an ambassador is extremely delicate and sensitive, particularly mine at this moment. You know that, of course."

Wolfe nodded. "I do."

"Then you realize the difficulty. If you refuse to furnish any explanation, or if you only call it the ca-

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price of an eccentric, what will be thought?"

"Yes." Wolfe pursed his lips. "I see your point." He heaved a sigh. "Very well. It's not too hard a nut. I can say that my sense of humor is somewhat unorthodox, as indeed it is, and that it amuses me to twist the tails of highly placed persons; that since you had said you wanted to catch a trout and have it cooked by me, and I had traveled here for that express purpose, I thought it would be a nice touch of mockery not to cook any you had caught; and that with me to think is to act. Will that do?"

"Excellently. You will say that?"

"At the moment I see no objection to it. Some unforeseen contingency might of course provide one, so I can't make it a commitment."

"I wouldn't expect you to." He was unquestionably a diplomat. "And I must thank you again. There was another little matter—but am I imposing on you?"

"Not at all. Like the others, I am merely waiting for the arrival of the attorney general."

"Then I'll mention it briefly. Mr. Ferris has told me of his conversation with Mr. Bragan in your presence. He told me of it, he said, because my name came into it and it concerned my mission to this country. I told him that I deeply appreciated his telling me; and I also expressed a hope that he would abandon his intention of repeating it to the attorney general. He finally agreed with me that his intention was ill-advised—that it would be prejudicial to the negotiations in which we are both interested. He regretted the hot impulse that led him to come to you and, finding Mr. Bragan here, to proceed as he did. It is not an exaggeration to say that he is in some despair, because he thinks he has compromised himself by speaking to Mr. Bragan before witnesses, and he thinks it would be futile to come now and ask you and Mr. Goodwin to erase the episode from your memories. I told him it is never futile to ask honorable men to do an honorable thing, and that I would ask you myself. I do so. Believe me, it will serve no useful purpose for Mr. Ferris's outburst to Mr. Bragan to be repeated to anyone anywhere."

Wolfe grunted. "I do believe you. On this the commitment can be as firm as you like." He turned. "Archie?"

"Yes, sir."

"We remember nothing of what Mr. Ferris said to Mr. Bragan this afternoon, and no provocation by anyone will refresh our memory. You agree to that?"

"Yes, sir. On my word of honor."

He turned. "And mine, sir. Is that adequate?"

"It is, indeed." Kelefy said it as if he meant it. "Mr. Ferris will be delighted. As for me, I cannot properly express my appreciation, but I hope you will permit me to proffer a slight token of it." He lifted his left hand

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and began working at the ring with the emerald. It was a little stubborn, but after some twisting and tugging he got it off.

"I think, my dear," he said, turning to his wife, "it would be fitting for you to present this to Mr. Wolfe. You wanted to come with me to thank him, and this is the symbol of our gratitude. Please beg him to accept it."

She seemed to hesitate a second, and I wondered if she had cottoned to my suggestion of an earring and hated to give it up. Then she took it without looking at it and extended her hand to Wolfe. "I do beg you to accept it," she said, in so low a voice that I barely caught it. "As a symbol of our gratitude."

Wolfe didn't hesitate. He took it, looked at it, and closed his fingers over it. I expected him to come out with something really flowery, but he surprised me again. "This is quite unnecessary, madam," he told her. He turned. "Quite unnecessary, sir."

Kelefy was on his feet. He smiled. "If it were necessary it wouldn't be so great a pleasure. I must go and see Mr. Ferris. Thank you again, Mr. Wolfe. . . . Come, my dear."

I went and opened the door for them. They passed through, with friendly glances for me but no emeralds, and I shut the door and crossed to Wolfe. He was admiring the emerald. I admired it, too. It was the size of a hazel nut.

"My word of honor may not be as good as yours," I said, "but it has some value. You wear it Monday to Friday, and I'll wear it Saturday and Sunday."

He grunted. "You brought your working case in, didn't you?"

"Yes. My gun's in it."

"I want the best glass, please."

I went to my room, got the glass, and returned. With it he gave the emerald a real look and then handed them to me. That seemed to imply that I had an equity, so, with the glass, I inspected the symbol of gratitude from all sides.

"I'm not an expert," I said, returning it to him, "and it may be that that little brown speck near the center adds to its rarity; but if I were you I'd give it back to him and ask for a nice, clear one."

No comment. I went to my room to return the glass to my working case. If I was going to try to sell him on Bragan's offer I'd have to step on it, for time was closing in. I had my opening gun ready to fire as I re-entered his room, but after a couple of steps toward him I stopped dead. He was leaning back in the chair with his eyes closed, and his lips were working. He pushed them out, pulled them back in . . . push . . . pull . . .

I stood and stared at him. He only did that when his brain was going full tilt, with all the wheels whirling. What now? What about? I couldn't suspect him of faking, because that was the one phenomenon I had never seen him use for putting on an act. It meant he was

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working. But on what? No client, no evidence, no itch whatever except to get in the car and start home. However, it was well established that when that fit took him he was not to be interrupted, so I went to a window for another look-out.

Wolfe's voice turned me around: "What time is it?"

I glanced at my wrist. "Twenty minutes to 8."

"I want to make a phone call. Where?"

"There's one in the big room, as you know. I understand that phone calls are being permitted, but they're monitored. There's a cop in the big room, and not only that, you can bet they've tapped the line outside."

"I must phone. It's essential." He put his hands on the chair arms and levered himself up. "What is Nathaniel Parker's home number?"

"Lincoln 3-4616."

"Come on." He headed for the door.

I followed him down the hall and into the big room. The trooper was there, going around switching lamps on. He gave us a glance but no words. When Wolfe picked up the phone he moved in our direction, but uttered no protest. Wolfe had taken out his notebook and opened it on the table, and from across the table the trooper focused on it, but all he saw was a blank page.

Wolfe was speaking: "Person-to-person call to a New York City number. This is Whiteface 7808. My name is Nero Wolfe. I wish to speak to Mr. Nathaniel Parker in New York, at Lincoln 3-4616."

I thought the trooper looked as if he would enjoy a bone, so I told him, "Parker's our lawyer. A reputable member of the bar and a very fine man. He's got me out of jail three times."

He was in no humor for conversation. He stood. I stood. And soon Wolfe was telling the receiver:

"Mr. Parker? . . . Yes, Nero Wolfe. I'm calling from Mr. Bragan's lodge in the Adirondacks. . . . Yes, of course you've heard. . . . I need some information from you, *mais il faut parler français exclusivement. Vous comprenez?* . . ."

He went on. The trooper was up against it. The phone calls were probably being recorded out at the tap, but no doubt he was supposed to stand by and note the substance, and he couldn't note meaningless sounds. The changes on his face kept me informed. First, he didn't know French, that was obvious. Next, he had an impulse to reach and cut the connection—he even started a hand out—but voted it down. Next, he tried looking intelligent and superior, indicating that he understood it perfectly, but gave up when he glanced at me and met my eye. Next, he decided to pretend that he was standing there only to see that Wolfe didn't twist the phone cord.

Going through all the phases took a lot of time, a quarter of an hour or more, and he was doing pretty

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well with the last one when Wolfe did him a favor by getting out his pencil and starting to write in the notebook. That gave the cop something to look at, and was a big relief to both of us, though I doubted if he could read Wolfe's fine, small handwriting upside down at a distance of five feet. I was closer and, stretching my neck, saw that he was writing the same lingo he was speaking. Since I don't know French, either, I just looked intelligent.

Wolfe filled a page of the notebook and part of another, and then suddenly went back to English: "Thank you very much, Mr. Parker. Satisfactory. I doubt if I'll need you again. Goodbye, sir."

He hung up, put the notebook in his pocket, turned to me, and opened his mouth to speak, but didn't get it out. The door to the veranda swung open and people entered—first, District Attorney Colvin, then a medium-sized guy with a round, red face, and last Sheriff Dell. Colvin, seeing us, stopped and turned:

"That's Nero Wolfe. Wolfe and Goodwin." He came on: "Wolfe, this is Mr. Herman Jessel, Attorney General of the State of New York. I've told him how things stand, and he'll talk with you first. Now."

"Excellent," Wolfe declared. "I'm ready, and it shouldn't take long. But not privately. If I am to disclose the murderer of Mr. Leeson, as I now intend, it must be in the presence of everyone concerned. If you'll please have them gathered here?"

They goggled at him. The sheriff muttered something to Colvin. Jessel was confronting Wolfe: "Will you repeat that, please?"

"It was clear, I thought. I am prepared to identify the murderer. I will do so only in the presence of the others. I will say nothing whatever, answer no questions, except with them present. And when they are here, all of them, and of course you gentlemen, too, I must first speak to the Secretary of State on the telephone. If he is not in Washington he must be located. I assure you, gentlemen, it is useless to start barking at me; I'll be mute. There is no acceptable way to proceed other than the one I suggest."

The sheriff and the D.A. looked at each other. Jessel looked at Wolfe. "You say you can identify the murderer. With evidence?"

"To convict, no. To indict, yes. To convince all who hear me, including you, beyond question."

"What's this about the Secretary of State?"

"I must begin by speaking to him. The reason will be apparent when you hear me."

"All right. We can reach him. But I have a must, too. I must first hear from you privately what you're going to say."

"No, sir." Wolfe's tone was final. "Not a word."

"Why not?'

"Because I have a score to pay, and if I told you first you might somehow interfere with the pay-

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ment." Wolfe turned a palm up. "What is so difficult? Get them in here. Get the Secretary of State on the phone. Let me speak to him. You can stop me at any point, at any word. Stand beside me, ready to snatch the phone from me."

The attorney general looked around. If for suggestions, he got none. He shoved his hands in his pockets, wheeled, and walked toward the fireplace. Halfway there he turned abruptly and came back, and spoke to Colvin: "Send for the others, please. I'll put in the call."

Attorney General Jessel, standing, was speaking into the phone: "Then you understand the situation, Mr. Secretary. . . . One moment. Here is Mr. Wolfe."

He handed the instrument to Wolfe, who was seated. Bragan and the Ambassador and Mrs. Kelefy were on a divan that had been turned around. Mrs. Leeson was on a chair at the end of the divan. Nicholas Papps, the man of guile and malice and simple candor, was perched on a cushion in front of Mrs. Leeson. Ferris and the sheriff had chairs a little to one side, with Lieutenant Hopp and two of his colleagues standing back of them. District Attorney Colvin stood by the table, practically at Wolfe's elbow, and Jessel, after handing Wolfe the phone, stayed there at the other elbow.

I was on my feet too, at Wolfe's back. I hadn't a glimmer of an idea where he was headed for, but he had said he was going to identify a murderer, so while they were arranging things I had gone to my room, got my gun, and put it in my side pocket.

Wolfe's tone was easy: "This is Nero Wolfe, Mr. Secretary. I should have asked Mr. Jessel to say that this will take some time, ten minutes or more, I'm afraid, so I trust you are comfortably seated. . . . Yes, sir, I know; I won't prolong it beyond necessity. You already know the details of the situation, so I'll go straight to my personal predicament. I know who killed Mr. Leeson. It would be pointless to denounce him to officers of the law. But I want to denounce him; first, because if I don't I'll be detained and harassed here interminably; and, second, because he has foolishly wounded my self-esteem. . . . Yes, sir, but if I tell it at all I have to tell it my way, and I think you should hear it first. . . .

"Today I was to cook trout for lunch. Four creels, tagged with the names of the fishermen, were brought to me. The fish in three of the creels were perfectly fresh and sweet, but those in Ambassador Kelefy's creel were not. They were not stiff or discolored, nothing so obvious; indeed, the cook apparently saw nothing wrong with them; but they had not been caught this morning. It would take too long to explain how an expert tells exactly how long a fish has been dead no matter how carefully it has been

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handled, but I assure you I can do it infallibly. Of course, I decided not to include them in my dish. The cook asked why, but I didn't explain, not wishing to embarrass the Ambassador. Naturally, I supposed either his luck or his skill had failed him this morning, and he had somehow procured those dead trout to cover his deficiency.

"I am making this as brief as I can. The news of Mr. Leeson's death by violence put a different face on the matter. The inescapable presumption was that Ambassador Kelefy had killed him, and it was indeed premeditated. He had caught those eight trout yesterday in addition to what he brought in—I haven't bothered to inquire about that—and had secured them at the edge of a pool in the river, immersed in the water. Probably they were alive when he did that, but I am not sufficiently expert to name the precise hour when they died. Also, he probably secured his weapon from the woodpile yesterday and hid it somewhere. So today, having to spend no time fishing in order to bring in a satisfactory creel, he had four hours for another matter—the murder of Mr. Leeson. Getting through the woods unobserved presented no difficulty.

"That was my presumption, but I would have been a fool to disclose it. It was only a presumption, and I was the only witness of the condition of the trout in his creel. Officers of the law have examined them without seeing what I did—though in fairness it must be considered that when I saw them they were supposed to have just come from freedom in the river, and the officers saw them some four hours later. Even so, when the district attorney asked me why I had not cooked the Ambassador's trout, I might have told him privately, but for his gratuitous spleen.

"Now, however, it is more than a presumption. The Ambassador has not explicitly confessed to me, but he might as well have. A little more than an hour ago he came to my room with his wife, ostensibly to thank me, and asked why I had not cooked the trout he caught. From my reply, and the sequel, he understood what was on my mind. At his suggestion I concocted a bogus explanation. He asked me to commit myself to it, and I straddled. He then made another request, no matter what, which he knew quite well to be unnecessary, since we understood each other tacitly, or he thought we did, and when I granted it freely, without hesitation he offered me a token of his gratitude by taking an emerald ring from his finger and telling his wife to present it to me. She did so, and it is now in my vest pocket.

"That, Mr. Secretary, was the wound to my self-esteem. The emerald was not a token of gratitude for anything I had done; it was a bribe to keep my mouth shut. Had it measured up to my conceit—had it been the Kohinoor or the Zabara

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—it might have served its purpose; but it is merely a rather large emerald with a noticeable flaw. So, naturally, I was piqued. When the Ambassador left me I sat and considered the matter. Not only was I piqued, I was menaced, and so were others. Unless the Ambassador were exposed we would suffer prolonged harassment and probably lifelong suspicion, and only I could expose him. I decided I must act, but first I needed to know what was feasible and what was not, so I telephoned my lawyer in New York.

"From books in his library he supplied the information I wanted, and I wrote it in my notebook. To make this report complete I must read it to you:

"From Section 25 of the Penal Code of New York State: 'Ambassadors and other public ministers from foreign governments, accredited to the President or Government of the United States, and recognized according to the laws of the United States, with their secretaries, messengers, families, and servants, are not liable to punishment in this State, but are to be returned to their own country for trial and punishment.'

"From Section 252 of Title 22 of the United States Code: 'Whenever any writ or process is sued out or prosecuted by any person in any court of the United States, or of a State, or by any judge or justice, whereby the person of any ambassador or public minister of any foreign prince or state, authorized and received as such by the President, or any domestic or domestic servant of any such minister, is arrested or imprisoned, or his goods or chattels are distrained, seized, or attached, such writ or process shall be deemed void.'

"From Section 253—I'll condense this: 'Anyone who obtains a writ or process in violation of Section 252, and every officer concerned in executing such writ or process, shall be deemed a violator of the law of nations and a disturber of the public repose, and shall be imprisoned for not more than three years and shall be fined at the discretion of the court.'

"That last, Mr. Secretary, explains why I insisted on speaking to you. If I had reported to the officers of the law who are here, and if, in their zeal for justice, they had maltreated the Ambassador, not only would they have been subject to prosecution under federal law, but so would I. I don't want to be imprisoned for three years, or even to risk any hazard of it, and I chose the expedient of reporting directly to you. I am, of course, leaving one question unanswered: What was his motive? Why did he kill? I haven't the answer, but I do have a conjecture. You will like to know, I think, that it is unlikely that his motive had any relation to his public mission or the negotiations he was engaged in.

"As I told you, he didn't give me

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the emerald himself; he had his wife present it. His exact words were, 'I think, my dear, it would be fitting for you to present this to Mr. Wolfe,' and not only were the words suggestive, but so were his tone and manner. He was giving me the emerald as a bribe not to divulge my surmise that he had murdered Mr. Leeson. Then why was it fitting for his wife to present it to me? Because she had, herself, been involved? Because she had supplied either the impulse or the motive? Because, in short, she was responsible for his having resorted to the extremity—?"

So it was Wolfe, not I, who found out what it took to light up Adria Kelefy's eyes. She came off the couch and through the air like a wildcat, and with a sweep of her hand knocked the phone, the whole works, off the table onto the floor. Colvin and Jessel dived for the phone. I took on the wildcat, grabbing her arms from behind, and she tugged and twisted and kicked my shins. Jessel got the phone and was telling it, "Hello hello hello," when another voice broke in:

"Yes, she was responsible." It was Sally Leeson. She had left her chair and circled around Papps to come within arm's length of Adria Kelefy. I tightened up on Adria's arms. Sally went on, in an even, dead, flat tone:

"You're not even a snake, Adria. I don't know what you are. You seduced my husband in your own home, your husband's home. I knew about it. He told me he couldn't tear himself away from you, so I tore him away and got him called back home. I suppose your husband heard about it—I think he would eventually. You have too many enemies to keep a secret like that. Then he was sent over here, and the day you got here you were after my husband again. I knew it and I tried to stop you, and I failed. Your husband hasn't failed. He has succeeded. He killed Dave. Why didn't he kill you?" She stiffened, and then started to tremble. "Oh," she cried, "why didn't he kill *you?*"

She stopped trembling, turned to the district attorney, and was stiff again. "I told you a lie," she said, "when I said I didn't suspect anyone. Of course I did. But I knew you couldn't arrest him—and I didn't want to tell you what a fool my husband had been—and what good would it do? What good will anything do now?" She started to tremble again.

The Ambassador had left the couch to come to us, and for a second I thought he was actually going to answer her. But he spoke, not to her, but to his wife. He put a hand on Adria's shoulder, and I stepped back. "Come, my dear," he said. "This is distressing." She moved, and he turned his head and called sharply, "Nicholas!"

That was a sight I had never expected to see and I don't expect to see again. Standing there were an attorney general, a district attorney,

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a sheriff, and three state troopers in uniform, not to mention a pair of private detectives; and none of them moved a muscle while a murderer calmly walked out of the room, taking with him his wife, who had driven him to murder, and a member of his staff, who had certainly known he was guilty.

But Wolfe moved his jaw muscles. He spoke sharply to their backs: "Mr. Kelefy! If you please. A purely personal point. Was it also a stab at my self-esteem that you arranged for me to be here? For the added fillip of gulling me?"

"No, Mr. Wolfe." The Ambassador had turned at the door. "When I expressed a desire to eat a trout cooked by you I had not yet contemplated an action that might arouse your professional interest. I had not forgotten the past, but I had accepted it. When events caused me to contemplate such an action it would have been imprudent, I thought, to ask you not to come."

Turning, he touched his wife's elbow and they disappeared into the hall, with Nicholas Papps at their heels.

The tableau broke up. Jessel muttered something about the Secretary of State and went to the phone. The sheriff and Colvin exchanged words. The troopers stood looking dazed.

Wolfe, on his feet, took the emerald ring from his pocket and handed it to the D.A. "Dispose of this as you see fit, Mr. Colvin. You were right about the notable incident, of course. Mr. Goodwin and I will be packed and ready to go in five minutes. Come, Archie."

He headed for the hall and I followed.

Of course, you would like to know if Kelefy paid for it, and so would I. He left for home the next day, taking his wife and Papps along, and a month later they shot him, but whether it was for the murder or for ruining the negotiations I can't say. Diplomatically speaking, I doubt if he cared much.

NEXT MONTH . . .

A bumper issue! Watch for —

AGATHA CHRISTIE (*her newest story!*)

A. H. Z. CARR

ALBERTO MORAVIA

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Jack and Mary McDonald's "The Apartment Hunter" is one of the twenty-two "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Eleventh Annual Contest. It is an amusing and highly readable fantasy about Mr. L. P. Bradley, investment broker of Cleveland, Ohio, and his conversation with the Prince of Darkness in the sunken study down below. But Satan, you will discover, was not impressed: he claimed he got a hundred "perfect crimers" a month!

Jack and Mary McDonald are a husband-and-wife writing team. Mr. McDonald wrote your Editors that EQMM's letter accepting their first story "contributed in large measure to a hectic but happy weekend in the McDonalds' lives." You see, our letter arrived on a Friday; the McDonalds' first baby, a boy, arrived the next day. The two events, said the father, "combined to make me feel about nine feet tall," and we gather from the continuing enthusiasm in his letter that Papa McDonald is still not back to normal size.

Both McDonalds are in their late twenties. Jack is a native of Cincinnati, Ohio, and was graduated from Xavier University in that city. Mary was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and was graduated from Marquette University in that city. Jack got a job as a reporter on the Cincinnati "Enquirer," and Mary came to Cincinnati after being a reporter on the South Bend, Indiana "Tribune" and the Des Moines, Iowa "Register," finally landing on the Cincinnati "Post." Now, obviously, Cincinnati isn't that *big, and besides, reporters, even on different newspapers in the same city, have a way of bumping into each other. They met, they married — now they have a child and EQMM has another "first story"!*

THE APARTMENT HUNTER

by JACK and MARY McDONALD

THE PRINCE OF DARKNESS HIMSELF, having no more pressing business at the moment, answered the bell. At the sight of him, the visitor started. "What the devil—" he began.

"Exactly," drawled Satan. "You were expecting an archangel?"

"No, no," the other stammered, confused. "It's just that I didn't quite expect you to fit the popular conception so closely. Horns, tail, cloven—" he trailed off lamely.

The Devil sighed wearily. "I take it you are an American," he said.

The visitor brightened. "Yes. Yes,

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I am. Cleveland, Ohio. Born and raised there. Bradley and Frimmel, investment brokers. Perhaps you've heard of us?"

Clearly unimpressed, Satan glanced at a pocket notebook. "No," he said, "but I have a half hour before my next appointment. Come in and have a spot of brandy."

"And how," he said after they were seated in the sunken study, "are things in America?"

"Fine. Just fine. Couldn't be better. You know," the American leaned forward confidentially, "I grossed three and a half million last year?"

"Is that so?" murmured his host politely. "Then what brings you to Hell? Thinking of opening a branch office here?"

"And try to beat the devil at his own game?" The other roared with laughter at his own joke. "No, thank you!" he said, wiping tears from his eyes as he regained his composure.

Beelzebub toyed restlessly with the stem of his brandy glass. If the world only knew what and whom the King of Evil had to endure, he said to himself, perhaps it wouldn't think so harshly of him. Sometimes it was just plain hell.

"Well, Mr.—er—?"

"Bradley. Lawrence Pruitt Bradley," said his guest, lighting a large expensive-looking cigar.

"To be sure, Mr. Bradley. And your business here, sir?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I'm thinking of engaging one of your apartments down here. Something, well—exclusive. In a quiet area, where I wouldn't have too much traffic with the riff-raff."

The Devil sipped his brandy slowly. "We have that type of accommodation, of course. There are a number of excellent suites adjacent to the Main Burner. Then there's a colony of quite comfortable lodgings just across from the Number One Hot Air Blower—over on Sulphur Square.

"But naturally," the Devil continued hastily, observing the eager light in Bradley's eyes, "those are restricted areas. There simply are too many people in Hell these days. The better quarters are necessarily reserved for the top-level malefactors."

"I expected as much," Bradley said, unabashed. He leaned forward with the air of one about to make a startling disclosure. "I believe, sir, that I can qualify. I have just committed the perfect crime."

He puffed importantly at his cigar, adding, "And I must say I managed it in a damned clever way."

The Devil pursed his lips. "You know," he sighed, "I probably get a hundred 'perfect crimers' a month. Most fall short of the mark. But none can say I'm unfair. Everyone gets his hearing." He pressed a buzzer at the side of his desk.

"You rang, Chief?" A gaunt dark man appeared in the doorway.

"Yes, Mach. Our friend here from America seems to think he has a case. Bring an Entrance Form and

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a copy of the Preferred Placement Questionnaire, please."

The dark man raised his eyebrows, inclining his head slightly toward Bradley. "What have you done, sir?" he asked politely.

"Murder," said Bradley pompously.

"Oh." The dark man was obviously disappointed.

"A regular Machiavelli, our Mr. Bradley," the Devil remarked, nodding pleasantly to his assistant.

"I daresay," muttered the dark man drily, disappearing suddenly through the door.

Bradley was somewhat nettled when the dark man returned almost immediately with the required papers, then disappeared again. This time the broker from Cleveland, Ohio, thought he saw a small puff of smoke lingering in the doorway, and imagined he smelled a fume or two of brimstone.

The Devil's tone remained kindly. "Now then, Mr. Bradley. Your accomplishment, if you please."

Bradley cleared his throat. "I'm afraid I have to—uh—toot my own horn a bit by way of background," he began. "As I said, I'm an investment broker. Head of Bradley and Frimmel, Cleveland. Until 1945 I'd operated as a sort of lone wolf, and I must say I did quite well. For years I was Mr. Big, one of the top dogs, you understand.

"I was respected too. Pillar of the community. Had the kind of success that's hard to come by. You know—beat the other fellow by hook or crook, then keep the 'crook' part quiet."

Satan nodded patiently. "And then—?"

Bradley scowled. "Then Frimmel came along. Right off I knew he was a comer. Everything that man touched turned into a dollar, and he had a way with clients—men and women alike. He'd wine 'em and dine 'em and pour on the old oil until it'd make you blush."

"I doubt that," the Devil murmured.

"Eh?" Bradley paused blankly, then went on. "This Frimmel was a real threat. Little fellow with delicate, pale skin and big eyes. He looked honest and, worse still, he was. Clients flocked to him, trusted him. So naturally I joined forces with him. As I always say, when you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

"Yes, sir, a shrewd move. And easy. I simply pulled the Big Brother Act." Bradley smirked broadly. "You know, the old line—what a pity two honest men like ourselves don't merge our talents and protect the little investors."

"A routine piece of chicanery," Satan commented in a bored voice. "Do get on with it, Mr. Bradley—my time is limited. I've appointments soon with several old tenants. Mr. Attila's fires haven't been banked to his taste, and Jack the Ripper has been complaining—"

Bradley hurriedly got on with it.

"We hadn't been partners long

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when Frimmel found out about some of the deals I'd pulled off. The widow McAllister's bonds, the Atwater Trust Fund—well, no matter. He threatened to expose me.

"Naturally I couldn't allow that. A holiday weekend was coming up, so I asked him to spend it with me at my lodge in Michigan. I promised I would explain everything. I even hinted that I wanted his help in making restitutions. The righteous little monkey agreed to come with me and agreed to say nothing until we'd talked it over.

"Well, before we left Thursday night I began arranging my alibi. I put some important papers on my secretary's desk, with a note telling her it would be worth her job if they weren't in the mail by the next day. I knew she'd discover later that I hadn't signed the papers—they needed my personal signature—and that she'd 'phone me at the lodge."

Bradley grinned evilly and Satan found himself responding in kind.

"We arrived at the lodge early Friday morning. It was going to be a nice sunshiny day, so we stripped down to swimming trunks right away. We cooked up a big breakfast and ate.

"Frimmel had just got up from the table. He reached for his sunburn oil, jabbering about how we could talk things over later, after a swim and some fishing. He was still jabbering away as I shot him through the back of the head.

"I wasted no time, you see, because I wanted him dead as long as possible by the time the authorities found him. That way it would be harder to tell exactly when he had died. Ummm . . . I can still see his childish surprise . . .

"I left the body where it fell and got busy staging a break-in. Forced a window, roughed up the place, and so on. I wasn't sure exactly how long it would take my secretary to discover the unsigned papers and call me, but I knew it wouldn't be too long. She was only to work a half day, to clear up some correspondence, and I knew she'd go like a fiend to be out by noon.

"Half the morning went by, so I cooked a lunch for two and ate it from two plates. I would want the police to figure Frimmel had still been alive at lunchtime.

"The call came through just before noon. My secretary was terribly upset. I hadn't signed the papers. I acted upset too, faked a few remarks to the dead Mr. Frimmel, and said I'd return to Cleveland immediately.

"I caught the first plane back. Told my secretary I'd attend to the papers personally because of the delay. Said I hoped to rejoin Frimmel at the lodge if the business didn't take too long.

"But shortly after I got back to Cleveland I had a mild heart attack. The hot weather and too much food and excitement, I guess. But it fitted in perfectly—I had a made-to-order excuse for not going back to the lodge. And I wouldn't let my wife

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call Frimmel—said he needed the rest and that I didn't want to alarm him.

"On Monday morning I called the office and asked for him. Naturally, he wasn't in. Try the lodge, I suggested. My secretary called me back and said there was no answer. I fretted most of the day away, pretending to wait for Frimmel to show up. Finally I acted worried and had my secretary phone the Michigan police."

Bradley leaned forward triumphantly. "It was nearly midnight before they reached the lodge and found the body. I felt safe. I knew they couldn't tell the exact time of death after three days.

"The officer they flew down to see me the next morning was very considerate. I told him—with appropriate breaks in my voice—how much Frimmel and I had looked forward to the holiday.

"He apologized all over the place about barging in when I was so ill, but he said it was routine procedure. I had to make a statement. It didn't take more than ten minutes.

"I told him Frimmel and I had spent all Friday morning lolling in the sun on the lake shore. Told him we saw no one and nothing suspicious, and that we'd talked over business affairs until going back to the lodge for lunch.

"Then the call came from my secretary, I said, and I dressed and left immediately, expecting to be able to fly back to the lodge as soon as I finished my business in town. But unexpectedly I suffered a heart attack—which was duly confirmed, of course, by my doctor.

"After I signed the statement the officer told me, carefully sparing me the gory details, that Frimmel had probably surprised an intruder in the lodge late Friday. His body was found in the dining room, the man said. He'd been shot through the back of the head and the place had been ransacked.

Bradley sighed contentedly. "After the policeman left, I had my wife bring in the newspapers. They played it up big. There were even a couple of feature stories—one on poor, stunned old L. P. Bradley and the overwhelming shock to his weak heart.

"There was another on Frimmel, making him out a hero. That was the funniest. Eyewitness account by the cop who found the body. 'I stumbled over something and looked down. There he was, pale and hunched up, dressed only in yellow swimming trunks. He was hardly bigger than a little boy.' "

"Hmmm," said the Devil. "And then, Mr. Bradley . . . ?"

Bradley's face clouded ruefully. "Well, what with the heat and the excitement of putting it over on the police, I guess it was too much for me. My heart gave out. I died suddenly Tuesday night. I came straight here, of course." He sat back, oozing smugness.

Satan carefully folded the unused

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Preferred Placement Form and put it in his desk drawer.

"Mr. Bradley," he said, "you may count yourself a very fortunate man. You saved yourself a good deal of embarrassment by dying so quickly."

"Eh? What do you mean?" Consternation had replaced Bradley's smugness.

Satan yawned and pressed the bell again. "Simply that you made one blunder, which would certainly have cast suspicion on you and probably would have led to your conviction."

Bradley chewed his cigar stub furiously, unable to speak.

"You see," the Devil explained, "you told me Mr. Frimmel had fair, delicate skin. He obviously was a man who sunburned easily, as he was beginning to rub sunburn lotion on himself when you shot him."

"I don't see—" Bradley broke in irritably, but Satan waved him to silence.

"You will, Mr. Bradley. Now then. You shot Mr. Frimmel right after breakfast. In other words, neither of you had been out of the lodge since arriving early that morning. But you didn't receive the expected call from Cleveland until noon—the call that would permit you to leave the scene of the crime.

"So, when the police questioned you, you had to account for your actions at the lodge until noon that day. In your sworn statement you told the officer you and Frimmel had lolled in the sun all morning—just the sort of thing men on a holiday would be expected to do."

"Of course," Bradley growled.

"The police would have caught your little lie, Mr. Bradley," the Devil said gently. "You see, the body's pigmentation processes are completely arrested at death. You overlooked that physiological fact.

"If you and a live Frimmel had really spent the morning in the sun, his body would have shown some sunburn. But since you killed him before he'd had a chance to be exposed to the sun, the body must still have been pale when found. Indeed, the eyewitness statement by the policeman who found the body described it as 'pale.'"

Bradley gaped. Satan continued. "The police are not stupid, Mr. Bradley. They certainly will note this inconsistency in your story. Were you still alive, I have no doubt they would be probing into your business affairs, noting the—er—irregularities. Perhaps they will even find the gun."

"No," Bradley muttered hoarsely, "it's in the lake."

"Well, no matter," Satan murmured. "They will have suspicions strong enough to make your death most fortunate for you—and especially for your family."

The gaunt dark man appeared at the door.

"Yes, Chief?"

"Mr. Bradley will be staying."

"Preferred Placement?"

"No, I hardly think so," the Devil chuckled. "Find him a spot over in the Slow Burn Section."

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

and another original for our **BLACK MASK** *section*

Martin Dardis's "Letter Writing As a Fine Art" is one of the twenty-two "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Eleventh Annual Contest. It is the tale of Willie Graham, a first offender, who got a real raw deal; but Willie had taken bad advice from someone who should have known better, and then Willie made an even bigger mistake . . . altogether a pathetic tragedy of errors, and a story that will make you pause and reflect.

The author is in his middle thirties. He now lives in Philadelphia, but he is a former New Yorker and Brooklynite. For a number of years he has done the kind of writing which he describes as "more drudgery than creation"—copy writing and commercials, extolling various products, primarily soap; statistical reports; sales and repair manuals; instructions on the use of electronic instruments; and, most recently, "a presentment on city institutions for the Grand Jury—the same Grand Jury you will find mentioned" in his first story.

It is interesting to note—particularly interesting to those of you who are would-be writers yourselves—that Martin Dardis did not make headway in his fiction writing until, as he himself expressed it, he "decided to turn from the 'how' of crime to the 'why' "—until, also, he began "compounding an assortment of characters, situations, and facts" which he had gathered during his own term of jury duty. Mr. Dardis has already learned what is probably the most important lesson in the whole curriculum of writing—if not in the whole curriculum of life . . .

LETTER WRITING AS A FINE ART

by MARTIN DARDIS

THIS WAS WILLIE GRAHAM'S FIFTH —and most important—Grand Jury. Before a sixth one made its inspection rounds, he would be out of County Prison.

The usual group of middle-aged housewives in their frilly Sunday best, retired insurance men in subdued pinstripes, and stenographers in sheer blouses and career-girl suits, crowded into the library with the usual naked curiosity in their eyes.

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Some of the objects of their curiosity set their backs to the jurors, and pretended to scan book titles. Others —the prison-wise—dropped their magazines under the table and reached for Bibles. They thumbed the pages and turned them noisily, watching out of the corners of their eyes to see if the inspection party noted their reading matter. It was well-known that if a Grand Jury appeared pleased with its monthly inspection, privileges were more numerous and desserts a trifle sweeter for a few days. There were no official orders—it was just a matter of plain human nature on the part of the warden and his staff.

Several jurors pushed into the doorway of the room where Willie Graham sat writing. In this makeshift schoolroom, converted from two cells next to the library, Mr. Livesey's letter-writing class was hard at work. The teacher rose and went into his standard explanation, which was as pat as the old cons' Bible-thumbing.

"We try to give prisoners some of the tools they need to fit them for life outside. The classes are informal, and directed at practical problems. For instance, the men whom you see here"—his sweeping gesture toward the twenty men included Willie, bent over a stubby pencil, and doodling on a sheet of lined tablet paper—"are studying the art of letter writing."

As always, the jurors' faces became serious at this point. Mr. Livesey fought down a desire to join the prison inmates in turning his back, then went on smoothly, "You would be surprised to discover how many of the men here—even some who have had a fair amount of formal education—are handicapped by not knowing how to write a simple letter . . ."

A few minutes later, as Mr. Livesey ushered the jurors back into the library, continuing his lecture on prison education, Willie tore up the paper on which he had been doodling. He took another sheet from the teacher's table, dated it, and began: "Dear Sir—"

According to prison rules, Willie didn't belong in the class, since he had already completed it once several months before. However, there had been some vacancies when Willie asked to repeat the course, so Mr. Livesey had weighed Willie's natural desire to get out of mopping the prison kitchen against his obvious driving determination to master the art of letter writing. The teacher in Mr. Livesey had regarded Willie's first time in the course as an outstanding success, but the trained prison worker in him had doubts. He had failed to win Willie's confidence, which was surprising, because the prisoner was an apparently amiable man, serving a short first term for attempted burglary. Hoping to do better with him the second time around, Mr. Livesey gave his approval for Willie to repeat the class.

Willie Graham knew all this, but everything that had happened to

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him in the past eight months had taught Willie to think twice before giving anyone his confidence. Sometimes when Mr. Livesey used that line about people getting into trouble because they couldn't write a letter, Willie felt like opening up and saying something. But then he would think of Al Darmstatt and the Volunteer Defender and the judge, and what had happened when he talked to them, and he'd keep his mouth shut and tell the story over again inside himself—all the while practicing more and more letter writing.

When Al Darmstatt had fired Willie on the service manager's say-so, it was just one of those things. Willie had been a pretty good helper in the garage, but he knew as well as the service manager that he'd never be a master mechanic. He had too much trouble puzzling out the service manuals for that, although he always seemed to have a natural way with the insides of a car. The service manager wanted a graduate engineer for a helper's pay, and that was all there was to it. Willie figured unemployment insurance would help tide him and the family over for a week or two until he could find another job, so he went and sat in a bar and had a couple of shots and three or four beers. He got to feeling pretty good while he waited for Al Darmstatt's office girl to figure out his time and make up his check. That's how, when he picked up his pay, he forgot to take his tool box.

That night, he saw the ad for a mechanic at Jimpson's garage, so he went out there first thing the next morning, and landed the job. When he said he didn't have his tools with him, that they were on the other side of the city, the boss said he was short of help, and Willie could borrow tools from the other mechanics until he got his own. Right after work that night he went all the way across town to Al Darmstatt's, but by the time he got there everybody had already gone home.

The next day he had to borrow tools again, and on his lunch hour he called Darmstatt's. The office girl said yes, she'd ask one of the mechanics to drop the tools off at Willie's house on the way home. But nobody brought the tools that night.

The following morning the other fellows at Jimpson's started making cracks about Willie borrowing their things all the time, so he asked the boss for a couple of hours off to go get his own. When he got to Darmstatt's, Al was out on a big business deal, the service manager was away picking up parts at a warehouse, and two of the mechanics had just gone to lunch.

Willie talked to a new man with a cold-steel stare and a voice like a No. 3 file. Willie guessed this was the fellow who had taken his place, and maybe felt funny about meeting him. Anyway, he gave Willie a hard time. No orders from Darmstatt, no tools. That was it. The office girl came out in the shop, and Willie

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could tell from the way she talked that she'd never even bothered to tell Darmstatt about his call. The new man said even if he was taking orders from her, which he wasn't, he wouldn't know whose tool box was whose, and he wasn't taking Willie's word for anything.

A rush job on a Cadillac was waiting for Willie back at Jimpson's, and he'd lose his new job for sure if he kept waiting around at Darmstatt's. It wasn't that Willie's old boss was trying to hold out on him—after all, they weren't a master mechanic's tools, only odds and ends worth a few bucks. Darmstatt hadn't given any orders about them because he didn't even know Willie had left them. They'd just sit there in the garage until they rusted, for all anybody cared about Willie getting them.

That night Willie worked late on the Cadillac, which was a break. It made up for the time he'd lost earlier in the day, and he couldn't afford to lose time now because Mary was expecting again. When the job was finished, Jimpson asked him to deliver it to the customer, over on the West Side. That was how, walking back to the bus line at 8 o'clock, Willie found himself outside Darmstatt's garage for the second time that day, only now the place was locked up for the night.

An idea hit Willie. He went around to the side door, extracted a screwdriver from the back pocket of his overalls, and set to work on the padlock. The hasp came off easily. After a little wrenching and prying against the wooden door, an inside bolt sprang loose, and Willie was in the garage.

He lit a match and looked near his old locker. The tools weren't there. Maybe Al Darmstatt had already had someone take them to Willie's house. That would be a laugh, Willie thought, and went on looking. He used up almost a pack of matches and dragged out several tool boxes before he found the right one. Just as he finished checking to see that all his wrenches were there, the cops came in and arrested him.

The one telephone call he was allowed to make from the House of Detention had to reach Mary by way of a message left with a neighbor, and Willie had no way of explaining that she'd better tell his boss he was out sick. So when Mary called up, crying, and told the plain, unvarnished truth that Willie had been arrested, Jimpson told her over the telephone that Willie was fired. Besides, as luck would have it, he had landed in the can the day before payday, and by the time Mary collected his wages, the rent was due and there wasn't $50.00 left for a bail bond.

So Willie sat it out in jail waiting for Al Darmstatt to tell the Grand Jury that it was all an innocent mix-up, and Willie had just been trying to get his own property back. That was when Willie got his first big surprise. Darmstatt said Willie had left some beat-up old tools at his

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shop but that Willie had never let him know they were there, and he figured this was some kind of trick on Willie's part to fill up his box with five or six hundred dollars worth of first-class tools—that was why, said Darmstatt, Willie must have dragged out all the other boxes. Of course, Willie, being the defendant, didn't ever see the Grand Jury that indicted him, so he never got a chance to tell those good people that he'd pulled out the other boxes while he was looking for his own.

Looking back now, Willie could understand why a guy like Al Darmstatt acted like that. Al had a big car agency, but he wasn't too particular when it came to some things —like those good tire buys he got a couple of months after some hijackings in the suburbs. And a man who has larceny hidden in himself is likely to think he sees it showing in somebody else. Besides, Al Darmstatt was always remembering that he was a big-shot businessman, and big shots don't like discharged employees going around breaking into their garages.

Willie kept hoping Al would drop the charges, but one day some cops came and took Willie to the prisoners' waiting room outside the court. His case went on in mid-morning, sandwiched briefly between a disturbance of the peace and an involuntary manslaughter. It never occurred to Willie that he would finally land in prison—not until his hurried conference with the lawyer the court had assigned to him, and then he got another big surprise.

The Volunteer Defender, an earnest young man in horn-rimmed spectacles, was friendly as he searched through thirty or forty folders for Willie's record. He glanced quickly through the folder. "Possession of burglar tools, burglary, and larceny," he read. "Those are pretty serious charges."

Willie told his story doggedly, from beginning to end, though he knew he wasn't telling it well. It came out as a jumble of telephone calls and Mary having another baby.

"If you explain the main part of it to the judge like that, you might get off with a suspended sentence," said the young lawyer. "Only make it much shorter."

"But he won't sentence me at all after the jury says I didn't do it," protested Willie.

"I don't advise you to insist on a jury trial," replied the lawyer. "They have the proof that you broke in—there's just no question of fact about that—and a jury might find you guilty. A jury trial costs the County $300 an hour, and if you go before a jury and are found guilty, the judge might give you as much as five years. Sometimes it's safer to plead guilty even if you're innocent. Now, let's see, if you plead to attempted burglary . . ."

If Willie had told his story badly to the lawyer, he told it even worse to the judge. He'd never forget the judge's wisecracks in sentencing

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him: "Even *if* I believed your story —which, mind you, I don't, because if I did, every man coming here before me would be telling me he was just picking up $100,000 he happened to forget in a bank, or a handful of diamonds he'd carelessly left behind in a jewelry store—" Except for Mary crying on a bench in the rear, the whole courtroom tittered. With a pleased expression, the judge had rapped for order, then went on: "As I was saying, even *if* I believed your story, I would still sentence you to six months in the County Prison, because you went about things in the wrong way—an illegal way. When you had difficulty contacting your former employer, you had no right to take the law into your own hands, by breaking into his premises. You could, for instance, have written your former employer a letter, so that he could arrange to return the property which you claim was yours."

It was all too true. Al Darmstatt always opened his own mail, and he knew perfectly well that Willie couldn't work without his box of tools. At the beginning, if he had received a letter directly from Willie, it would have been simple for him to tell one of the mechanics to let Willie have the box.

But writing a letter was something else again. Willie had spent a large part of his English classes in Johnson Vocational School trying to get straight what part of speech was which. He had struggled so long and with so little success that the teacher never had got around to showing him how to express an idea on a piece of paper. The last thing in the world Willie had thought of doing was writing Al Darmstatt.

So here he was in County Prison, but it was almost over. One more week of lessons with Mr. Livesey, and Willie would get out. He wasn't crazy about the job the prison people were sending him to—janitoring at the School for the Blind—because that meant floors to mop instead of motors to fix. But he couldn't expect a mechanic's job again, and this would mean at least a couple of bucks more than Mary had been getting on relief.

With the baby coming along, Mary hadn't been able to work, and things were pretty grim at home. The last time Mary had been up to visit him —just before the baby was born—she'd started crying. She never could keep things to herself, and at last she told him how Billy, their older child, had got into trouble at school when the PTA had its annual Outdoor Day benefit. All the other kids brought money from home to spend on soda and hot dogs, but every penny of the relief check was used up and she couldn't give Billy a cent. He stayed behind in the school corridor, and when another kid came in to go to the bathroom, Billy knocked him down and turned out his pockets all for a dime. To top it off, the principal had blamed it all on Willie.

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Well, Willie would soon be back home, and he'd take care of Mary and the baby, and see that Billy had a dime to spend with the other kids. Now he began writing on the sheet of paper, just as Mr. Livesey came back into the room, "We have on hand. . . ."

In the shadow of the abandoned warehouse, Willie bent over. He tugged for half a minute before Al Darmstatt's two-carat diamond ring came loose. Thanks to the County Prison, Willie now knew a reliable fence. Al's flashy diamond stickpin quickly joined the ring. Willie then reached for the wallet in Al's inside pocket, being careful not to get blood on his hands from the gaping wound the jack-handle had made in Al's head.

Willie pulled a fistful of tens and twenties out of the wallet—Al's weekly draw from the business, usually two or three hundred—and five crisp hundreds from a separate compartment, and stuffed the money in his pockets. A lot of dimes for Billy.

A block from the warehouse, Willie walked swiftly out of the shadows and up the footpath of the bridge across City Creek—more sewer than stream. As he reached the middle of the deserted span, he dropped the jack-handle and wallet into the murky water. Just before he tossed away the wallet, he pulled out of it a single sheet of paper which had been typewritten one night in the office of the School for the Blind. He read it over under the single dim lamp, before shredding the paper and scattering the scraps into the creek. The letter read:

"Dear Mr. Darmstatt:

We have on hand one hundred surplus new tires, in their original wrappings, all standard sizes, at $5.00 each. You may examine them at our warehouse, 321 North 5th Street, at 8:00 P.M. next Friday. If you are interested in purchasing them, we shall be glad to make immediate delivery for cash . . ."

ONCE AGAIN . . .

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE has in stock a supply of strong, handsome binders for your copies of *EQMM*. Each binder holds one complete volume—that is, six issues of the magazine. It is easy to use, handy, convenient and economical. The price is $1.50 postpaid. Send your order and remittance to: Special Binder Dept., Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, 527 Madison Ave., N. Y. C. 22.

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For five years prior to World War II, Thomas M. McDade was in the F.B.I. where he specialized in cases of bank robbery and kidnaping. During World War II he served in the Pacific theater as a Lieutenant Colonel; his most interesting job was to help reorganize the Manila Police Department in the Philippine Islands. Now Mr. McDade is in big industry. An accountant and lawyer, he is at present controller of one of America's largest corporations, and his interest in crime is strictly literary—reading and reminiscing about it.

It is part of those sedentary occupations—Mr. McDade's reading and reminiscing—that we now bring to you. And certainly Mr. McDade qualifies handsomely on both subjects. A genuine G-man, he is also a member in good standing of the Baker Street Irregulars—so when Mr. McDade writes about the F.B.I. and Sherlock Holmes he knows whereof he speaketh. We think you will find his article not only fascinating but informative.

SHERLOCK HOLMES AND THE F.B.I.

by THOMAS M. McDADE

IT WAS A SPRING EVENING SOME years ago that four of us were sitting in the Regent Palace Bar in London. The quartet consisted of Detective-Inspectors Owen and Brown of New Scotland Yard, and Bob Akers and myself, both of us F.B.I. agents. I was in England on vacation, a rare event in those days, while Akers was a sort of exchange student. He was attending the Metropolitan Police School at Hendon while a Scotland Yard man was at the F.B.I. Police Academy in Washington. We had been exchanging professional confidences, which is another way of saying we were swapping stories of our cases. In my pocket were a couple of Trichinopoly cigars which I had spied in a tobacconist shop that day and which, as a long-time admirer of Sherlock Holmes, I felt impelled to buy. On a sudden inspiration, I gave Akers a wink and, drawing one of the cigars from my pocket, I proffered it to Owen.

"Inspector," I asked, "can you tell me what kind of a cigar this is?" He looked at me suspiciously.

"What is this, some kind of a joke?" he asked.

"No," I assured him, "I just wanted to know if you could identify the cigar."

He took it in his hand, smelled it,

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examined the wrapping, and then said, "I think it's Indian tobacco."

"Fine!" I answered. "Now can you tell me what kind?"

He looked thoughtful for a moment, and then said, "I'm not quite sure of the name. Isn't it something like 'monopoly'?"

"Good," I said. "That's close enough." I was about to explain to Owen that we were just testing him, for Sherlock Holmes could identify 140 varieties of tobacco from the ashes alone, when Akers, in a lowered voice, whispered to me, "Ask him if he was in the Army."

"Why?" I asked.

"Holmes could always tell an Army officer by the handkerchief in his cuff." Looking across at the Inspector, I could see the bit of white peeking out of his sleeve.

"Inspector," I asked, "were you in the Army?"

"Oh, yes," he replied. "I did a bit."

From this experience, I concluded (1) that Holmes's methods of observation and deduction were still valid, and (2) that the representatives of Scotland Yard had improved since Holmes himself had called Gregson and Lestrade the best of a bad lot.

At the same time, it seemed to me that it might be interesting to compare Sherlock Holmes's methods with those of the F.B.I., to see how much The Great Detective had anticipated J. Edgar Hoover. At a recent meeting of the Baker Street Irregulars, that scholarly band of Sherlock Holmes devotees, I ventured a few remarks comparing the Holmesian techniques with Bureau experience. After the meeting, Ellery Queen, an Irregular of long standing, asked if I would not extend my remarks for readers of EQMM.

First, for all his theorizing, Holmes was an eminently practical man. His use of informers shows his practical side. In THE VALLEY OF FEAR, Holmes gets his first lead from Porlock who, "encouraged by the judicious stimulation of an occasional ten-pound note sent to him by devious methods, has once or twice given advance information of value." We never actually meet Porlock but he sounds like the ideal informer. "Porlock is important not for himself, but for the great man with whom he is in touch. Picture to yourself the pilot fish with the shark, the jackal with the lion—anything that is insignificant in companionship with what is formidable." Here is the ideal informer—well-placed, and disposed to tell for a price.

In *The Adventure of the Illustrious Client* we meet another of Holmes's informers. "Johnson made his name first as a very dangerous villain and served two terms at Parkhurst. Finally he repented and allied himself to Holmes, acting as his agent in the huge criminal underworld of London and obtaining information which often proved to be of vital importance." Knowing there are persons and places to which the

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law officer cannot have access, Holmes sends his man seeking the information he needs, and Watson reports the event in his richest prose. "Johnson is on the prowl. He may pick up some garbage in the darker recesses of the underworld, for it is down there, amid the black roots of crime, that we must hunt for this man's secrets."

For information a little higher up on the social scale, Holmes uses Langdale Pike, "a human book of reference upon all matters of social scandal." Like the seasoned investigator, Holmes is always willing to pay for what he cannot always get himself.

For some reason the whole subject of informers (or informants as they are called in the Bureau) is usually discussed in whispers. Even among those who profit from their information, the trade is felt to be slightly reprehensible. For the man who turns in his fellow man, there is still the Judas taint. What is even more surprising is the small amount paid for information. I know one informer who turned in a murderer and was paid only two dollars. The amount was set by the police who regularly employed him and who felt that paying him more would make him more difficult to deal with in the future.

Holmes does not mention the real difficulty in using informers—namely, their unreliability. They will lie, invent stories, and lead you a merry chase if they have no real information at the moment. They will also, if possible, use you for their own purposes, and, like the double agent of fiction, play parties against one another. I knew one informer who worked with agents so long that he began to impersonate one. He began to extort money from people whom he threatened to arrest and, to give an air of authenticity to his claims, he would telephone the agents with whom he had worked while his victim stood by listening to his conversation. The victim would hear him legitimately call the F.B.I. and then hear him speak as though he was reporting in on a case. His double talk soon excited the suspicion of the agent and the informer himself wound up in jail.

The picture of Holmes sitting in his armchair in Baker Street engaging in pistol practice with his hair-trigger and a supply of Boxer cartridges, making the initials of Victoria Regina in the opposite living-room wall, is a familiar one to Doyle readers. To the F.B.I. agent who must qualify in four or five different weapons each month, winter and summer, often on snow-covered ranges, the picture suggests sybaritic ease.

The fact of the matter is, Holmes seems to have distrusted firearms and when the occasion demanded them, he was more inclined to depend on Watson to bring his service revolver. Even when he carried his own, his gingerly handling of it suggests the most excessive caution.

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In THE SIGN OF THE FOUR he carried an unloaded revolver to the scene of action and "having loaded *two* of the chambers, he put it back in the right-hand pocket of his jacket." Carrying an empty or only partially loaded revolver can be more dangerous to its owner than having none at all. It might be needed before it is loaded, or the empty chambers might be the next ones to be fired. On some guns, the cylinder revolves to the right, on others to the left. The only way to be sure that there is a shell in the next chamber coming up is to keep the gun fully loaded—and if you are afraid of a fully loaded gun, you should not be carrying any.

Actually, Holmes's favorite weapon is a heavy hunting crop. He carries it to capture Clay, the bank burglar, in *The Red-Headed League;* it accompanies him in *The Adventure of the Six Napoleons* (while Watson carries the revolver); and in *A Case of Identity* he threatens the villainous stepfather with it. For London in the last century, a hunting crop was no doubt adequate; it would hardly serve in present-day Chicago—or London.

On the matter of fingerprints, one might think that the F.B.I. would be supreme. Not only does it have the largest collection and some of the greatest experts, it has developed the single-finger system as it is nowhere else known and used. But even here Sherlock Holmes was before his time.

In THE SIGN OF THE FOUR he identifies a fingerprint on an envelope as "a man's thumb print. Probably the postman's." Even today the F.B.I. has not been able to determine sex by fingerprints and, unless other fingers are shown by position, there is no assurance a print is from a thumb or a particular finger. It is too bad that Holmes did not embody his knowledge on this subject in one of those little monographs he wrote. As it is, Holmes's method seems to be as lost to us as the key to the cipher of Roger Bacon or the Egyptian art of preserving dead bodies.

There are other subjects, too, on which it would have been interesting to have Sherlock's views. Likely subjects for his pen would be the *Identification by Laundry Marks,* and perhaps a little paper on the *Recognition of One Hundred and Thirty-Two Types of Automobile Tires and Treads, including Snow Tires.*

On one of those train rides on a case down in the country—in this instance, Woking—Holmes tells Watson his views on another great criminologist. "His conversation," recalls Watson, "was about the Bertillon system of measurements, and he expressed his enthusiastic admiration for the French savant." The Bertillon system was still very much in vogue during Holmes's time, and it is not surprising that he favored it with his high opinion. The fact of the matter is that the system was

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greatly overrated and succumbed very rapidly after Henry had published his system of fingerprint classification. Bertillon's system was based on the measurement of different parts of the body; presumably no two people would have the same precise measurements. The weaknesses of the system, however, were the lack of precision of the measurements, the time required to take them, and the similarities of different people.

Bertillon also lost considerable standing by testifying at the Dreyfus trial, improperly identifying the disputed bordereaux as having been written by Dreyfus. His system persisted in the Paris Police only so long as he remained in the Identification Bureau. When he left, the fingerprint method of identification rapidly superseded it.

I have nothing but the highest praise for the Bureau's handwriting experts, although I found them trying at times. It seemed that no matter how much material I supplied to them for comparison with the extortion letter or other piece of evidence, I was invariably asked to supply even more specimens for comparison. Holmes, on the contrary, could draw amazing conclusions from a few bare scribbles.

"Well, what do you make of that?" Lestrade, the Scotland Yard Inspector, asks of The Great Detective in *The Adventure of the Norwood Builder.*

"That it was written on a train," replies Holmes. "The good writing represents stations, the bad writing movement, and the very bad writing passing over points." And then he adds the true Sherlockian touch: "A scientific expert would pronounce at once that this was drawn up on a suburban line, since nowhere save in the immediate vicinity of a great city could there be so quick a succession of points." Ah, there is handwriting analysis at its best!

Many of Holmes's observations on crime and criminals are still valid today. "It is a mistake," he says in A STUDY IN SCARLET, "to confound strangeness with mystery. The most commonplace crime is often the most mysterious, because it presents no new or special features from which deductions may be drawn. This murder would have been infinitely more difficult to unravel had the body of the victim been simply found lying in the roadway without any of those *outré* and sensational accompaniments which have rendered it remarkable." This is true. The F.B.I.'s superb record has few unsolved major crimes; those that there are fall in the category of "a body in the roadway."

On getting information out of people, Holmes remarks: "The main thing is never to let them think that their information can be of the slightest importance to you. If you do, they will instantly shut up like an oyster. If you listen to them under protest, as it were, you are very likely to get what you want." This

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is an experience all investigators have had, especially in the poorer quarters of cities. The most innocent inquiry of shopkeepers or neighbors about people brings blank faces and silence, particularly when the inquirer is known to come from the police. City people, and particularly the poorer classes, tend to be neutral in the war on crime, and are reluctant to give information on others. For this reason, the trained agent has at his hand a whole bag of pretexts ranging from the outworn census taker to the more recent health inspector.

In *The Crooked Man,* Holmes poses as "a registration agent." I presume this is the equivalent of our real estate agent. I knew one agent who had a whole set of unusual pretexts to which he was always adding new and different ones. Probably, like Holmes, he was a frustrated actor. His favorite in the country was impersonating a bird-watcher, complete with field glasses and bird guide, while in the city he was usually looking for heirs to a fortune left by a lonely old man. There is nothing quite so likely to make one person tell what he knows of another if he thinks good fortune may befall that person. This agent had an elaborate set of genealogical charts, on the last spaces of which he would add the names of the persons about whom he was inquiring. Spreading these before the person he was pumping for information, he would often get every fact they could recall about the people in whom he was interested.

In disguises, Holmes showed the restraint of the great artist. His changes were not too unusual, but still they were sufficiently subtle to call for considerable skill. "He disappeared into his bedroom and returned in a few minutes in the character of an amiable and simple-minded Nonconformist clergyman."

Now, there is the touch of the real artist; a simple clergyman is not enough. The Master Detective, true to his own character, must be "Nonconformist."

His other roles are more functional than literary: "a rude sailor dress with pea jacket and coarse red scarf" (THE SIGN OF THE FOUR); "a drunken-looking groom, ill-kept and side-whiskered" *(A Scandal in Bohemia);* a common loafer *(The Adventure of the Bryl Coronet);* an Italian priest *(The Final Problem);* a rare book dealer *(The Adventure of the Empty House);* a plumber *(The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton);* a sea captain *(The Adventures of Black Peter);* a trench worker *(The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax).*

As far as the F.B.I. is concerned, it does not have the same problem as Holmes in creating the illusion of a "Nonconformist clergyman" or even of a sea captain. Undoubtedly, somewhere among the ranks of regular agents, there is a *genuine* Nonconformist clergyman—just as there are sea captains, riding masters, pharma-

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cists, professional dancers, and book binders. Among its 4,000 agents, there are men with previous experience in almost every craft and trade, in all the professions, with nearly all the languages, to say nothing of experts in all forms of sport and skill. It has had world record holders in track, firearms, and swimming; it has former auto racing drivers, deepsea divers, and lapidaries. When the case really demands the ultimate, it does not produce an agent *posing* as a portrait painter—it has an agent who *is* a portrait painter.

Trailing, as Holmes called it—and what the F.B.I. calls tailing—is always difficult and often unrewarding. The Great Detective had his failures too. In fact, more often than not he lost his quarry. In A STUDY IN SCARLET, Holmes's man slips out of a four wheeler without Holmes seeing him; in *The Adventure of the Missing Three-Quarter,* Dr. Armstrong, whom Holmes is following on a bicycle, stops his carriage and suggests that Holmes precede him because the road is narrow. Not being equipped with a rear-view mirror, Holmes gets too far ahead before he observes that his man has turned off the road and escaped him.

In his most successful trailing Holmes has a most imaginative solution for a problem which faces the F.B.I. on kidnaping cases. How do you follow a vehicle which will expect a tail and yet remain completely out of sight?

"A threadbare and venerable device, but useful upon occasion," explains Holmes. "I walked into the doctor's yard this morning, and shot my syringe full of aniseed over the (cab's) hind wheel. A draghound will follow aniseed from here to John O'Groats." And so Holmes, with the dog Pompey, traces his quarry to his lair.

The F.B.I. has brought the technique up-to-date. In kidnaping cases, ransom instructions have sometimes called for the money to be delivered by leaving it in a car to be then driven away by the kidnapers. A concealed container will drip, at intervals, a few drops of a colorless chemical which will glow when exposed to fluorescent light. Such a light, playing on the road after the car has passed, will show a clear trail.

In cases requiring a continuous watch on premises, Holmes turned to his invaluable Baker Street irregulars, a squad of street urchins who could observe without being noticed. The employment of minors, even in the good work of the F.B.I. is frowned upon in this country; so, perhaps unfortunately, there is no squad of Pennsylvania Avenue irregulars.

The Bureau today has a more practical device. When street observation is required for a long enough time that a man on foot would be noticed, a small enclosed delivery truck is used. A sign on its side declares it to be from a neighborhood laundry or television repair shop.

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Its rear doors contain mirrors instead of the usual window glass. These are "two-way" mirrors which permit an agent in the truck to watch a street or building without himself being seen.

One agent, so situated, where he was waiting and looking for a much-wanted criminal, was startled to see the fugitive come down the street and make directly for the rear doors of the truck. For a minute the agent thought the fugitive had seen through the ruse and had come to examine the car. Behind the glass he waited, gun in hand, for the criminal to approach. Then, when the man was right at the door, his face not more than a few inches from the agent, he stopped, and still staring into the mirror in the truck door, adjusted his tie, straightened his hat, and started off down the street. The agent barely recovered from his surprise in time to jump from the car and nail his man.

The problem of codes and secret writings occurs more frequently in fiction than in fact. Holmes demonstrates his powers in deciphering the Musgrave Ritual and in solving *The Adventure of the Dancing Men*. In at least two other cases he decodes messages whose meaning is concealed by some cryptogrammic device. This is in contrast with the modern invesitgator who might spend a lifetime without encountering a single such case.

In my own experience I can recall only one instance of the use of a code, and then with doubtful results. I was working with an investigator from another government department who had to send a message to one of his branch offices. He was asking them to check up on an individual who had been connected with a house of prostitution in that city. He wrote out a telegram and, to insure privacy, put some of the key words of the wire in code. His code was taken from a dictionary code book in which each English word had an Italian word equivalent, though not the real Italian synonym.

I have always assumed that some naive clerk must have transcribed his message at the other end. Only that could explain the reply he received that evening:

CANNOT UNDERSTAND THIRD SENTENCE YOUR WIRE. WORD "BORDELLO" NOT IN CODE BOOK. PLEASE CLARIFY.

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The story we now bring to you has an interesting background . . . Its author, Mr. C. Y. Lee, was born in China but now resides in San Francisco. He finished college in Yunnan Province during the Second World War, came to the United States, and was graduated from Yale Drama School in 1947. His Chinese plays have been well received in "little" theater groups, and Pearl S. Buck has recommended Mr. Lee's work highly.

"The Forbidden Dollar" is the author's first published short-short story. It won First Prize of $750 in the "Writer's Digest" contest of 1954 and was awarded Third Prize in the forthcoming VOLUME 5: BEST ORIGINAL SHORT-SHORTS, *edited by Robert Oberfirst, to be published by Frederick Fell in March 1957. The anthology contains short-shorts by many distinguished writers, including Quentin Reynolds, Ray Bradbury, Steve Allen, and Robert Fontaine.*

Now read the short tale of Mr. Weng, the Confucian scholar . . .

THE FORBIDDEN DOLLAR

by C. Y. LEE

MR. WENG SUSPECTED THE BEEF IN the beef noodles to be horse meat; nevertheless he had eaten it. He had eaten the bowl so clean that the proprietor of the open-air restaurant would think it did not have to be washed. Mr. Weng looked at the bowl and was embarrassed, for it was customary for a man of good breeding to leave some food in the bowl when he was through. It was a shame to eat the bowl so clean—an infamy to his prestige as a Confucian scholar, although unemployed.

Hastily he paid for the lunch, dusted his threadbare silk gown, and started for Heavenly Bridge, fingering in his deep pocket his last silver dollar. It was a forbidden dollar. Three months ago the Communist Government had ordered all silver, gold, and American money to be changed into the Communist currency, the *Jinmingpiao*. Mr. Weng had had sixteen dollars then; he had changed fifteen and kept one for a souvenir. Now this silver dollar was worth fifteen times as much as it had been three months ago—in the black market, that is. Although Mr. Weng had sold most of his belongings, including his most valuable treasure, *The Four Books of Confucius*, starvation had always been flirting with him like a persistent harlot in Peiping's Eight Great Lane. That is why Mr. Weng decided to exploit his souvenir—the

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last silver dollar. With a heavy heart and his stomach still empty, he started for Heavenly Bridge.

The typical Peiping bazaar was crowded, noisy, and dirty as usual. Candy peddlers, wrestlers, magicians, sellers of herb medicine, and monkey players were all contributing to a noise which, in Mr. Weng's opinion, was an outrage to Peiping's serenity. Safely clutching the silver dollar in his hand, he quickened his steps and weaved through the mass of people without losing the studied poise of a Confucian scholar. But in his mind he bemoaned the fate of Confucian scholars. Respectable as he was, he was now reduced to visiting a man as low as Pock Mark Ding, second-hand goods peddler and blackmarketeer.

There was a big crowd in front of Pock Mark Ding's stall and a noise that almost drowned the usual din of Heavenly Bridge—the noise of a man's arguing, swearing, and imploring, and the heated murmuring of the throng. Mr. Weng shouldered his way into the crowd. To his surprise he found that Pock Mark Ding, handcuffed to a policeman, was making most of the noise. Beads of sweat were shaken off his broad face and big blue veins stood out in his neck as the peddler talked and gesticulated wildly. His cleanshaven head was steaming like a pot of hot rice.

"I'm innocent!" he shouted. "I'm innocent, I tell you!"

The police officer jingled three silver dollars, pointed an accusing finger at the blackmarketeer, and barked, "Innocent, eh? All my men saw you trying to sell these silver dollars. Two years in jail, as the law says . . ."

"It is not my money, I tell you," Pock Mark cried. "Somebody else must have put it in my pocket . . ."

Mr. Weng wiped his forehead. *Lucky day,* he thought; *it could have been me. Imagine a Confucian scholar going to jail!*

"It's true, I tell you!" Pock Mark was now arguing even more heatedly. "Somebody slipped three silver dollars in my pocket . . ."

Ridiculous excuse, Mr. Weng thought; *nowadays who would be so stupid as to put money in somebody else's pocket?*

Mr. Weng had never liked Pock Mark. He wished he had never moved into the cubicle three doors away from Pock Mark's. He would have left the compound long ago had he not developed a liking for Pock Mark's children. The peddler had always scorned him. He often showed off to the other neighbors that he could make more money than a Confucian scholar. It pained Mr. Weng to realize there was much truth in this boasting. Pock Mark could at least make enough to feed a family of considerable size, whereas he, a Confucian scholar, did not even have the money to get married. Now he was glad that the police had caught the man selling silver dollars. Two years in jail—

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ha, not long enough! The scoundrel deserved at least three.

"Officer!" Pock Mark was now begging. "I'm innocent, I tell you! I've an old mother, a sick wife, and seven children to feed . . ."

A lie, Mr. Weng cried in his mind; *he has no mother and has only five children, and his wife is as healthy as a water buffalo.*

He felt a chill when he thought of Pock Mark's wife. She was so long-winded that to Mr. Weng she seemed capable of scolding a man a solid hour without changing her breath. Mr. Weng had often wondered how this ugly couple could have produced five children so nice and so quiet, and so beautiful. He was very fond of them, especially of Lotus, the eldest daughter. She had nursed him when he had almost died from an attack of vomiting sickness a year ago. A very pretty little girl, that Lotus. She must be seventeen now. Her mother would certainly sell her to Eight Great Lane if Pock Mark went to jail. Many starving neighbors had sold their daughters . . .

The police officer jerked his head. One of his men came to Pock Mark. He grabbed his arm and ordered, "Get up, you!"

Mr. Weng shook his head. *Too bad his children will have to starve,* he thought; *that youngest boy of his is a plump little monkey, and clever . . .*

Mr. Weng liked that boy. Quiet like a fish, always sitting in front of that mud cubicle playing with some cheap trinkets. Whenever Mr. Weng passed by, the boy would wave his dirty little hand at him.

Pock Mark grabbed one of the police officer's legs and cried out like a woman, "I have a sick mother and eight children to feed! Please let me go. Oh, master from the blue Heaven . . ."

Mr. Weng almost laughed. A moment ago the rascal had only seven children, now he had eight. A liar with a poor memory. It was a miracle that Lotus could have been so sweet and beautiful. A girl like her raised by such a man was indeed like a flower growing out of a heap of waste. For a moment Mr. Weng could not take his mind off Lotus.

He remembered when he was dying of the vomiting sickness how the herb doctor had shaken his head sadly, how Lotus had tried to feed him with the bitter herb juice but he just couldn't swallow anything. He remembered that when he was getting worse the herb doctor had told Lotus to get the Western doctor. He must have been in bad shape, otherwise the herb doctor would not have sent for his enemy, who had often been ridiculed for curing people with a knife more often than with medicine. But that time the Western doctor did not use his knife, thank Heaven! After examining Mr. Weng with some western hocus-pocus, the doctor squeezed some juice into his arm, then said to Lotus, "This man needs blood."

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At the mention of blood Mr. Weng had passed out. And when he woke up, he found his arm tied to Lotus's arm with a thin rubber hose, and he felt his heart burning as though it were being roasted over a fire. Mr. Weng remembered all this. Whenever he thought of Lotus's blood running in his veins, a strange affection would always well up in him, and he was in constant fear that her mother might sell her to Eight Great Lane . . .

The police officer was still trying to free himself from Pock Mark's grip. With his free foot he kicked him in the mouth and Pock Mark let go of his leg and fell back with a muffled cry. "Take him to the police headquarters," the officer commanded.

When Mr. Weng saw Pock Mark being pushed through the crowd by two policemen, he could also see Lotus being dragged toward Eight Great Lane. As a Confucian scholar, he hated publicity and loathed trickery. But now he could not help it. Quickly he dug his hand into his pocket, brought out his last silver dollar, and clumsily slipped it into the pocket of a middle-aged man on his left. The man wheeled and seized Mr. Weng.

"Pickpocket, pickpocket!" the man yelled, and thrust his hand into his pocket to see what had been stolen. His face almost whitened as he brought out the forbidden dollar.

"Look! Look!" he cried, frantically brandishing the coin in the air. "Everybody here is my witness! This is not my silver dollar! This man has put it in my pocket!"

The police officer took the silver dollar from the man's hand and turned to Mr. Weng. "Is this your money?" he asked.

Mr. Weng calmly dusted his silk gown and cleared his voice. "Yes, it is mine."

"How many silver dollars have you?"

"Four."

"Search him," the officer ordered. Two policemen searched Mr. Weng, but found nothing.

"Where are the other three?" the officer demanded.

Mr. Weng cast Pock Mark a glance. The peddler was handcuffed and whining like a convict on his way to the gallows. Mr. Weng pointed at him and said a bit contemptuously, "I put them in that man's pocket."

When the police removed the handcuffs from Pock Mark's wrist and clamped them on his, Mr. Weng lamented the stupidity of the police. They should at least have said to him: "There are a million ways to get rid of the forbidden dollars, but why in the name of a turtle's eggs did you slip them into other people's pockets?"

However, Mr. Weng was glad the police were too muddleheaded to think of such a sensible question. For even he, a Confucian scholar, could hardly think of a logical answer.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **OGDEN NASH**

TITLE: ***The Three D's***

TYPE: Bedtime Story

LOCALE: Near Salem, Massachusetts

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *To join the sorority known as The Three D's, Victoria had merely to perform a feat Daring, Deadly, and Done-never-before . . . The famous humorist in a definitely nonhumorous mood.*

VICTORIA WAS AN ATTRACTIVE new girl at the Misses Mallisons' Female Seminary — such an attractive new girl, indeed, that it is a pity she never grew to be an old girl. Perhaps she would have, if the Misses Mallison had established their Seminary a little closer to Newburyport — or at least a little farther from Salem.

Victoria was good enough at games and not too good at lessons; her mouth was wide enough to console the homely girls and her eyes bright enough to include her among the pretty ones; she could weep over the death of a horse in a story and remain composed at the death of an aunt in the hospital; she would rather eat between meals than at them; she wrote to her parents once a week if in need of anything; and she truly meant to do the right thing, only so often the wrong thing was easier.

In short, Victoria was an ideal candidate for The Three D's, that night-blooming sorority which had, like the cereus, flourished after dark for many years, unscented by the precise noses of the Misses Mallison.

So felt The Three D's, so felt Victoria, and the only obstacle to her admission lay in the very title of the club itself, which members knew signified that none could gain entrance without the accomplishment of a feat Daring, Deadly, and Done-never-before. Victoria was competent at daring feats, unsurpassable at deadly feats, but where was she to discover a feat done-never-before?

Of the present membership, Amanda

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had leaped into a cold bath with her clothes on, Miranda had climbed the roof in her nightgown to drop a garter snake down the Misses Mallisons' chimney, Amelia had eaten cold spaghetti blindfolded thinking it was worms, and Cordelia had eaten worms blindfolded thinking they were cold spaghetti. What was left for Victoria?

It was Amanda who, at a meeting of the Steering Committee, wiped the fudge from her fingers on the inside of her dressing gown and spoke the name of Eliza Catspaugh.

"Who was she?" asked Miranda, pouring honey on a slice of cocoanut cake.

"A witch," said Amanda.

"She was burned," said Amelia.

"Hanged," said Cordelia.

"And she couldn't get into the churchyard, so they buried her in the meadow behind the old slaughterhouse," said Amanda.

"The gravestone is still there," said Amelia. "Oh, bother, the cake's all gone! Never mind, I'll eat caramels."

"There's writing on it, too," said Cordelia, who was not hungry, "but you can't read it in the daytime, only by moonlight."

"I'd forgotten how good currant jelly is on marshmallows," said Amanda. "The Three D's must tell Victoria about Eliza Catspaugh."

Late next evening Victoria took her pen in hand. *Dear Father and Mother,* she wrote, *I hope you are well. I am doing well in algebra but Miss Hattie is unfair about my French ireguler verbs. I am doing well in grammar but Miss Mettie has choosen me to pick on. Dear Father, everybody elses Father sends them one dollar every week. I have lots of things to write but the bell is wringing for supper. Lots of love, your loveing daughter, Victoria.*

Victoria knew that in ten minutes Miss Hattie Mallison would open the door slightly, peer at the bed, murmur, "Good night, Victoria, sweet dreams," and disappear. It took Victoria seven minutes to construct a dummy out of a mop, a nightgown, and several pillows and blankets. As she lowered herself to the ground she heard the door open, heard Miss Hattie's murmur, heard the door close.

The soaring moon ran through Victoria as she marched, as she skipped, as she pranced toward the old slaughterhouse. She had for company her high moon-spirits and her long shadow — the shadow which was a Victoria that no Miss Mallison could ever cage. "No girl has ever had a taller, livelier companion than my shadow," thought Victoria, and she breathed deeply and spread her arms, and her shadow breathed with her and spread crooked arms up the walls and across the roof of the slaughterhouse.

The moon grew brighter with each burr that Victoria struggled against on her way across the meadow that had been abandoned to burrs, the meadow where no beasts fed, the meadow where Victoria's shadow strengthened at each proud and adventurous step.

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Where the burrs grew thickest, where her loyalty to The Three D's wore the thinnest, she came upon the gravestone. How hard the moon shone as Victoria leaned against the crooked slab, perhaps to catch her breath, perhaps to stand on one foot and pluck the burrs off. When the stone quivered and rocked behind her, and the ground trembled beneath her feet, she bravely remembered her purpose: that at midnight, in the moonlight, she was to prove herself a worthy companion of Amanda and Miranda, Amelia and Cordelia. Unwillingly she turned, and willfully she read the lines which the rays of the moon lifted from the stone so obscured by rain and moss.

Here Waits
ELIZA CATSPAUGH
Who touches this stone
on moonlight meadow
shall live no longer
than his shadow.

The job of memorizing was done, the initiation into The Three D's handsomely undergone. "Gracious, is that all there is to it?" thought Victoria, and set out for the seminary.

It was natural that she should hurry, so perhaps it was natural that she did not miss the exuberant shadow which should have escorted her home. The moon was bright behind Victoria — who can tell how she forgot there should have been a shadow to lead the way?

But there was no shadow — her shadow had dwindled as she ran, as though Victoria grew shorter, or perhaps the moon grew more remote. And if she did not miss her shadow, neither did she hear or see whatever it may have been that rustled and scuttled past her and ahead of her.

"I hope my dear little dummy is still there," thought Victoria as she climbed through the window. "I hope Miss Hattie hasn't been unfair and shaken me."

She tiptoed across the room in the dark to the bed, and bent to remove the dummy. But as she reached down, the dummy, which was no longer a dummy, reached up its dusty fingers first . . .

NEXT MONTH . . .

A "good measure and running over" issue!

Watch for —

GEORGE HARMON COXE

MIGNON G. EBERHART

AVRAM DAVIDSON

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ROY VICKERS**

TITLE: ***The Dacey Affair***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Chief Inspector Curwen

LOCALE: Fendlesham, near London

COMMENTS: *The Case of the Cruel Stepmother, the Maniac Killer, and the Matrimonial Adventurer — at least, that's the way the newspapers headlined it. But it was far subtler than that . . . A gripping series of murders set against one of Vickers's most fascinating crime backgrounds.*

IN ENGLAND THE POPULAR PRESS likes its front-page murders to fit into the framework of the old melodramas. Mrs. Dacey, being a second wife, therefore became Julia Dacey's Cruel Stepmother. By the time a studio photograph of this rather stodgy matron had been built up by the staff artists, she really did look preposterously cruel.

Julia, being blue-eyed, attractive, and well-behaved, was cast for the nitwit heroine whose beauty and innocence make her anybody's dupe—until they decided to groom her for the role of The Maniac Killer. William Millard, disappointingly, who appeared to be a steady kind of man, was a very doubtful choice for The Matrimonial Adventurer. But the Dacey home was just what a news editor would have ordered. It was an Eighteenth Century Manor House with a three-acre garden—at Fendlesham, a one-time village some twenty miles out of London.

The Maniac Killer idea had a springboard of fact in a tragic actuality. There was no mystery about it—the family had never tried to hush it up. Julia herself mentioned it to Millard.

Matrimonial Adventurer or not, Millard wanted Julia as Julia, and told her so in the garden after lunch, on his first visit to her home.

"I'm glad you asked me." She was very grave about it. "Before I

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answer, I'm going to give you a chance to back out. Don't speak, please! When I was seventeen, I killed a girl at school. I was at Hendlemere—up the river, near Thanford. On River days—two a week—senior girls took turns being in charge of the boathouse, with three junior girls—twelve-year-olds—to do the chores, which included checking the paddles and punt cushions.

"Punt cushions!" she repeated. "You know what I mean? They aren't cushions but hard mattresses about half the size of a bed mattress. They were kept in a dark, cavernous sort of cupboard. I threw one in the cupboard, not knowing Doris Trallen was hiding inside to dodge her share of the work. She was a small girl for her age, and the first cushion knocked her down—at least, that's what we supposed. I shouted to the others to hurry up. We threw twenty-two cushions into that cupboard and then I locked the door. Doris was suffocated and—" Julia stopped short. "But you know already?"

"I do. And I'm wondering why you have to hurt yourself all over again when I'm asking you to marry me."

"I hoped you would hear it first from me, Will!"

"Darling, I almost did! I was nineteen when it happened—I read the news reports at the time. I didn't realize the girl was you until about two hours ago. Just before lunch, when I was small-talking with Mrs. Dacey, she said something—I don't know quite what—but it ended 'since Julia was at Hendlemere.' Then it all flashed up. It was a ghastly accident, but surely you've forgotten it by now!"

So one would think. But there were factors which kept the memory green.

"I'd forgotten it more in the first year than I have now. I have dreams—nightmares."

"Dreaming that you're doing it all over again, I suppose?" His sympathy won her confidence.

"Not quite. The dreams aren't about poor Doris. About me. As if I had a jinx. In the dream it's always the moment after—after the killing. Never anybody I know. Often I dream I have killed animals."

"Let me share the nightmares and maybe they'll go away."

The kiss prevented Julia from relating the repercussion on her own family. But Millard heard it a few minutes later from her father.

Arthur Dacey had been a University lecturer in chemistry (the papers made him a professor and endowed him with absent-mindedness). Shortly after his wife's death, when Julia was five, one of his former students invited him to enter the family business—a small firm of manufacturing chemists. In fifteen years Dacey's work on the extended uses of strychnine (The Murder Drug in the case) turned the small firm into a large company.

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Dacey discovered that he had accumulated a modest fortune. He resigned, added a laboratory to the Manor House, and continued his researches unhampered by a Board of Directors.

Millard interrupted him in a doze in his study—to make a manly little speech, with a peroration on his inability to keep Julia on the scale to which she was accustomed. Mr. Dacey, who was preoccupied, paid little attention.

"Yes, of course. I gathered that Julia was making up her mind. Very pleased, my dear Millard—er—William. But before we accept our new relationship, I have to fulfill a promise to Julia. The fact is that while she was at school—"

"Thank you, sir, she's told me herself," said Millard and added unwisely, "it must have been a pretty grim business for you."

"It was indeed! I went down to the school, expecting to meet the poor child's parents. Only the mother was there. The parents had been divorced and there was a trust in favor of the child only. The family history seemed to make everything worse, if that were possible. Imagine my position. I could devise no means of consoling the poor woman except the obvious one."

But it was not obvious to Millard.

"I married her, William. Mrs. Dacey! The lady you met at lunch."

Millard recorded in his diary that he was shocked. He seems to have been unable to visualize Mr. Dacey's sense of obligation to the dead child's mother. A little later he noted with regret that Julia herself failed to see anything morbid in this marriage, which served the convenience of all parties. She remained on excellent terms with her stepmother. Mrs. Dacey was a competent housekeeper. The two women ran the large house with one daily cleaner, though Julia, who had graduated in chemistry, gave much time to her father as secretary and bottle-washer.

Mrs. Dacey was short and shapeless, with large prominent eyes and a round face which was emphatically dimpled. She was shy by nature and covered it with a professional cheerfulness. On the surface she was a totally unremarkable, inoffensive woman with a tendency to talk about food.

When Millard came out of the study, Maud Dacey was standing at the table in the hall in the act of opening a box of Athene Chocolates (the name was changed after the scandal). She offered him one, but he declined. In a stroll round the garden she recited Julia's virtues, with frequent pauses for the consumption of chocolates.

Again Millard's diary becomes a minor factor. He records that she took him to a remote corner of the garden and showed him an animal cemetery of seven graves of her personal pets. Two dogs, two cats, two marmosets, and a parrot, all of whom had come to a premature end.

I wasn't really listening until she

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came to the parrot, which had belonged to her mother. She told me the parrot had been suffocated . . .

The diary did not say how or why or by whom.

The married life of the Millards is very fully documented—that is, for the first two and a half years. It is but small exaggeration to say that Julia could hardly have replaced a broken coffee cup in that period without the police eventually hearing all about it. Yet the outline of it would fit thousands of lively young couples—the kind who would be very happy, if they had a little more money.

Arthur Dacey bought them a small house at Kingbiton, which is six miles Londonwards of Fendlesham. Millard was showing promise in the actuarial department of an insurance company. His salary provided decency and reasonable comforts—but the reasoning had to be flawless. Mr. Dacey seemed to have forgotten that a house is comparatively useless without furniture. So their car was a veteran.

Twice a week Julia would run over to Fendlesham to type and index her father's notes and tidy his laboratory, which the cleaner refused to enter. Maud Dacey had been coached in handling apparatus, with doubtful results. Most of the laboratory chores remained for Julia. In return, Maud would pop in and out of Kingbiton to do little jobs for Julia. After the first six months a routine was established by which the Millards spent alternate weekends at the Manor House. Sometimes Millard would help his wife clean the laboratory. So he had access to the strychnine as easily as Mrs. Dacey and Julia.

The Millards were popular. It always costs a little more to be popular than one thinks. There was much checking of each other's figures.

"During this two and a half years, Mrs. Millard, would you say that your relations with your husband were harmonious?"

"Yes, very harmonious."

That was all Julia said. Chief Inspector Curwen never pressed a question. For a complete answer we must skim a dozen pages of the report and weld odd bits together.

"Before we had been married a year, we were always having to talk about money. We didn't accuse each other of extravagance, but we did have differences of opinion."

"For instance?"

"It's hard to give one without being unfair. He said once that my father ought to pay me a salary. And I said I would not like to ask him because he had made a trust to benefit Mrs. Dacey and myself after his death. We didn't quarrel, but I think we were both a little disillusioned."

"Did you ask your father for a salary?"

These indirect questions about their affairs and their personal relations pivoted on the incident of the Pekingese dog—a posthoneymoon

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gift from Maud Dacey. In that childless home the dog had become a personality, a focus of domestic legend, the hero of many a tall story. One Spring evening, after a dinner and theatre party in London, Julia had to be told that the dog was dead. She had gone straight upstairs to hang up her best coat. When she came down, Millard stopped her in the hall and broke it to her as gently as he could.

Julia behaved as most women of her kind would have. She was very distressed and rather incoherent. Soon, she asked:

"Where is he?"

"In the sitting room. I've covered him with the rug. You'd better not go in."

"Why mustn't I see Chiang?"

"Darling, there's no must or mustn't. The nightmares have stopped since we've been married. Don't risk starting them again—don't give yourself a visual image of Chiang lying dead. We've had a lot of fun and happiness with that little fellow. Let that memory have a chance to stay uppermost."

"I won't go in if you don't want me to," she agreed. "I can't understand it. He was in perfect health this afternoon. Maud remarked on it when she came in to do the curtains, just before I left to meet you? Why is he—*dead?*"

"Probably his heredity—they're a very artificial breed and I've heard they often die suddenly." She looked unconvinced. He added, "Tomorrow, before I go to the office, I'll take him to the Central Pet's Clinic for a *post-mortem*. In a couple of days they'll tell us why."

A couple of days later he handed her a typewritten slip, under the Clinic's letterhead.

"You may understand all that—I don't," he said. "The vet told me that it means one of those seizures which we call 'heart failure'."

Eventually the police pursued the unimportant death of the dog as they pursued the trivial topics of conversation at the Manor House breakfast table the following June.

Taking breakfast were Mrs. Dacey and the Millards—Mr. Dacey never appeared at breakfast even on the routine weekends.

A meandering chatter was cut short by a high-pitched bellow from upstairs. All three jumped up from the table. Millard reached the bathroom first and said that Arthur Dacey had answered him, but too indistinctly. The door was a heavy one and it took Millard a few minutes to break a panel with a footstool.

Arthur Dacey was lying dead. On the floor beside him was a broken tumbler which still held some of his morning saline—and enough strychnine to make a *post-mortem* purely a legal formality.

The coroner had been a personal friend. As the procedure is very much what the coroner chooses, the inquest became little more than a funeral oration.

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"The police have not invited this court to consider the possibility of foul play," he told his jury. "You may conclude that the strychnine must therefore have been placed in that glass by deceased's own hand. Your task is to decide whether he did so of design or by accident." He was scornful of the possibility of even the most temporary insanity. He drew a picture of an eminent scientist "absorbed in his work," suddenly going down to his laboratory, perhaps with the glass of saline in his hand—and so on. The jury returned a verdict of accidental death.

But the police do not confide their hopes and fears to a coroner's court. Waiting at the Manor House was Chief Inspector Curwen of Scotland Yard, who told Millard that he had come to inspect the laboratory. He broke the seals affixed by the local police and found the laboratory remarkable only for its tidiness.

"Spick-and-span! Looks as if it were kept only for show."

"My wife and I cleaned it on Saturday afternoon. I don't think Mr. Dacey entered it again, although the coroner suggested that he must have." Led by Curwen, Millard described the routine of the house.

"So Mrs. Millard had free access to the laboratory at all times?"

"Everybody had free access. Nominally, the door was kept locked, but the key was always hanging on a hook in the hall."

That, decided Curwen, was practically the end of the case. Nearly all convicted poisoners have been caught through the police linking them with the source of the poison. Here it would be possible to link all the members of the household and most of the dead man's friends.

Julia, after confirming her husband's statements, said that her father made constant use of strychnine in his experiments. She produced laboratory records, which she herself had kept up to date. A few minutes later the fact emerged—checked subsequently by other chemists—that approximately 500 grains of strychnine had been removed since Saturday morning. Curwen was surprised only by the amount.

Maud Dacey, interviewed in the dining room, spoke as if her late husband had been a much respected employer.

"When Julia—Mrs. Millard—first married I used to clean up in the laboratory. I'm afraid I failed to give satisfaction—I think, really, I was afraid of all those poisons lying about."

It was an odd picture of a research chemist at work and Curwen smiled indulgently.

"I don't say I ever *saw* anything like that—only test tubes and things to be washed in a special way. But a lot of those scientific things are invisible, aren't they, and they might cling to your clothes without your knowing it." She added with a sigh, "I shall always believe that was how Chiang met his death."

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"Who was Chiang, Mrs. Dacey?"

"We were told it was heart failure, and of course it may have been—oh, Chiang was a Pekingese—the dearest little dog. He was in perfect health. I was the last to see him alive—"

Curwen escaped as soon as politeness permitted. While exchanging small talk with Millard on his way to the car he wondered why Mrs. Dacey had dragged in that silly story about the little dog.

"What did your Pekingese die of, Mr. Millard?"

"Strychnine poisoning." Millard frowned. "It's a pity Mrs. Dacey mentioned it. I know it was strychnine because I had a *post-mortem* on the dog. But that's all I can tell you. I haven't the ghost of a notion how the stuff got into its food."

And nobody had the ghost of a notion how the strychnine had got into Dacey's saline, thought Curwen.

"Mrs. Dacey thinks the dog died of heart failure."

"She does. And so does my wife." Millard groaned. "I do most earnestly request you not to reveal to them what I have told you."

"I can't make any promises."

"That's a pity!" snapped Millard. "The promise could not affect your investigation. The examination was done by a Mr. Carshaw, of the Central Pets' Clinic, Brandover Street. I told him what I intended to do. He did not exactly consent, but he looked the other way while I pinched a piece of his notepaper to fake a report."

"But why did you have to deceive the ladies?"

"Be human, Inspector. A woman can get very fond of a dog. My wife is imaginative and slightly neurotic. She had free access to that lab. In a fortnight she would have been accusing herself of killing her own dog through some impossible carelessness of her own."

"We'll see how we go," compromised Curwen and turned back to the house, this time to begin a full-dress investigation.

In a couple of months he possessed all the evidence obtainable—and failed to achieve even so much as an inspired guess.

"There could have been a double miracle, sir—one killing the Peke and the other killing the man," he told the Assistant Commissioner. "If miracles are barred, there's Mrs. Dacey and the Millards—one or the lot! If Millard poisoned his wife's dog, why did he pay the vet to tell him so? If Mrs. Dacey poisoned the dog while she was alone in the house that evening, why offer me the dog story?"

"I know how you feel, Curwen." His chief was not wholly convinced that there had even been a crime. "But you can't altogether rule out coincidence."

"Just so, sir." Curwen was nothing if not respectful. "And I can't rule out nearly five hundred grains of strychnine missing from the old man's stock. That's an ounce and it would go into a small phial. The

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dog and the man between 'em had ten grains—which is nearly ten times the fatal dose."

Curwen came to his final grievance.

"It isn't as though any of 'em had a police record for us to work on!"

None of them had a police record. But the Assistant Commissioner's daughter was the same age as Julia and had been at the same school at the time Doris Trallen had met her death. But he did not mention it to Curwen because, being a sensible man, he considered it irrelevant.

Julia's mourning for her father was bedraggled by the long police investigation. Millard good-temperedly endured frequent heckling on the incident of the Pekingese.

"Your wife left Mrs. Dacey in your house at about six thirty, to join you in London. Mrs. Dacey was back home in the Manor House by eight fifteen. Do you believe that some person unknown broke into your house for the sole purpose of poisoning your dog?"

"Fantastic, of course," agreed Millard. "But when you pin it down like that—where do we go from there?"

Nowhere, admitted Curwen to himself. Assume that poison had been put in the dog's food by Mrs. Dacey—or by Mrs. Millard—or thrust down its throat by Millard before his wife came downstairs. Assume any theory you like, and it still didn't make sense.

In deference to Julia's bereavement, Millard restrained his own elation at the change in their circumstances. Julia would benefit by about a thousand pounds a year, which would be doubled on Maud's death. In the meantime, Julia's health was suffering. She admitted that the dreams were returning, with a new twist. It was Maud Dacey who suggested that the Millards should sell their house and share the Manor House with her. ("It's so big that we shan't have to live in each other's pockets.")

Domestically, the arrangement was successful. Julia's health improved. In a few months they had settled into the routine which lasted nearly two years. The Millards acquired their own circle of young couples and gave their own parties, at which Maud would put in a token appearance. Julia—seen through the eyes of acquaintances during this period—was indistinguishable from any other attractive young wife who is satisfied with her lot. She could keep her end up at a party, without reminding anybody of tragedy in her past. Nobody could point to any sinister characteristic.

Maud Dacey emerges as a placatory figure, with a juvenile appetite for chocolates. Indeed, through all this normality the Athene Chocolates kept bobbing up—a theme song of disaster—involving Millard himself. There were occasions when Maud's cheerful little aphorisms over the evening meal would exasperate him into snarling at her. The follow-

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ing evening he would present her with a box of Athene Chocolates, indistinguishable from those with which she kept herself supplied, which he would buy from the Korner House near his office. He made light of Julia's frequent protests that it was wrong to encourage Maud to exceed the ration imposed by Dr. Blagrove.

One day, a month exactly before the regime came to an abrupt end, Maud called unexpectedly at Millard's office.

"I have heard from my first husband," she told him. "I am afraid he has made no more of a success of his second marriage than of his first. He is now a very lonely man." She sighed. "I admit that in his first marriage there were faults on both sides. We are none of us perfect, and—"

"And he wants you back?" Millard tried to say it naturally.

"Reading between the lines," said Maud, "your guess is probably correct. But the letter is actually from a solicitor and it only asks me to send him—by post—some photographs of our daughter. Doris would have been twenty-one next month, had she lived."

The photos and other mementos were stored with a Safe Deposit company. Millard drove her there and brought the deed-box home—incidentally observing that the account stood in her former name of Trallen.

That night in her bedroom she unlocked the deed-box and re-examined the contents, which had been collected and deposited the day after Arthur Dacey had offered her marriage. An open box of Athene Chocolates within arm's reach, she took out and handled the objects, which were exclusively personal. Underneath three framed photographs of Doris as a baby and toddler was a packet of snapshots. She lingered over the first half dozen, skimmed the rest, and repacked them all for mailing to the child's father. A lock of hair enclosed in glass; a number of small toys; a jeweler's case; a tiny pair of shoes; some juvenile drawings—the sentimental litter of a woman who had never attempted to understand herself, all undisturbed, unthought of, since her second marriage.

True, a few tears fell. Whether or not any deep feeling for her dead child survived—whether or not she was working up a sentimentalism for a very special purpose—her reaction to the child's trinkets is seen now as a prelude for The Fatal Supper Party—a traditional headline in this type of murder.

In fact, it was not a party and it wasn't even supper—being the routine evening meal remarkable at the time only for Maud's social and even ethical stupidity. To begin with, the dress she wore appeared as a joke in bad taste. It was expensive, gay, and designed for a much younger woman. It carried a brooch of singular inappropriateness—an elaborate

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design of two butterflies, in diamond points and turquoise. Maud herself was self-conscious and fluttery. The Millards exchanged puzzled glances.

"How nice you look, dear!" said Julia. "I've never seen that brooch before—it's intriguing!"

"Today is an anniversary," Maud said. Her round, prominent eyes looked like glass counterfeits. "Today would have been my daughter's twenty-first birthday—if she had lived."

That threw the Millards completely off their balance. Never before had Maud made any allusion to the childhood accident.

"I wouldn't have mentioned it, only it seems foolish to make a bogey of something that happened so long ago—disloyal to our friendship." She beamed on Julia. "This brooch was given to Doris by her uncle when she left home for her first term. Rather unsuitable, really, for a schoolgirl. She never wore it. But she would have worn it today."

Julia achieved a smile. Millard thought that his wife was more puzzled then shocked. Maud's chatter glided into the trivialities of the day. Later, when Julia was pouring the coffee, Maud took from the sideboard a box of Athene Chocolates, removed the cellophane and dropped it in the wastebasket.

"Will has been spoiling me again!" she gushed. "He says he was rude to me this morning, but that's just an excuse. You must help me do justice."

Word for word it was the same little speech, made every time she received the placatory gift of chocolates. She held out the open box. Millard reached forward to pass it to Julia. Thus he could not do otherwise than present the opposite end of the box. Julia took a chocolate from the end of the row nearest her hand. Millard then returned the box to Maud.

"I know it's no use trying to press you," she simpered. She took a chocolate herself from the middle of the layer, then replaced the lid. "I shall leave the box on the sideboard, Julia, and I hope you will help yourself."

The Millards had no social engagement, so the two women cleaned the dishes. There was a slight departure from routine in that the three sat together in the hall lounge for a symphony program on the radio. The program ended at ten thirty, when Maud went upstairs to bed. Giving her time to turn the corridor into the west wing, the Millards began to discuss her odd behavior. Julia thought there was nothing below the surface, but Millard differed.

"She wasn't listening to Beethoven—she was sitting bolt upright in a sort of trance. She might get a brainstorm in the night, slip down the back staircase without our hearing her, and dump herself in the river."

"Oh, nonsense!" Julia was still laughing at him when the history of the Manor House repeated itself.

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This time the scream of pain came from the west wing, in a woman's voice. Again the door was locked. Julia ran for the same footstool. Millard stopped her a dozen yards from the door.

"There's no need for us both to go through this. You stay here and keep cool—I'm bound to want your help in a minute."

He smashed the panel and entered the room. Maud was lying half dressed on the floor. On the dressing table was an open box of Athene Chocolates, half empty.

"She's dead." He spoke to Julia from the doorway. "Will you call Dr. Blagrove and tell him I'm on my way to pick him up."

Chief Inspector Curwen took over from the local police on the following morning, a Friday. The Millards courteously offered him the house as a headquarters, limiting themselves to two rooms upstairs and taking their meals at restaurants. The inquest, held on Monday, was adjourned after medical evidence that Maud Dacey had died of strychnine poisoning, taken in a chocolate or chocolates at approximately 10:40, Thursday night.

In the meantime, though the facts were few, the publicity was getting into its stride. Two Sunday papers had carried photographs of Doris Trallen and the boathouse in which she had died, seven years previously.

Curwen had taken the dining room for himself. When Julia came in, he thought she looked too shattered to talk. He was wrong.

"You've read in the papers about how I accidentally killed a junior girl when I was at school?" she asked as he sat opposite her at the table.

"Of course, we can't prevent 'em printing that kind of thing—"

"Did you know that the child's mother was Mrs. Dacey?—that my father married her six weeks after the accident?"

It was the first time in many years that Curwen had been startled by a witness. His whole approach to the case was threatened.

"It wasn't in the papers," he muttered. "It seems a strange sort of marriage—but has it any bearing on her death?"

"Last Thursday would have been her daughter's twenty-first birthday. Things may have been preying on her mind. She was certainly in a very queer state at dinner that night. But I admit I never thought she would kill herself."

Kill herself! So that was to be the Millards' line! Curwen wanted details—which Julia gave, emphasizing that it was the first time Maud had alluded to the accident.

"Mightn't it have slipped out unintentionally?" suggested Curwen.

"No. She was definitely rubbing it in. It was as if she hated me."

Curwen was trying desperately to piece it together.

"For instance," continued Julia, "I remarked on a brooch she was wear-

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ing. She told me that it had belonged to her Doris—and that Doris would have been wearing it that night—if she had lived!"

Curwen was still sceptical.

"Look at it this way, Mrs. Millard. On previous occasions when she was wearing the brooch—"

"She had never worn it before. It was a child's—or a very young girl's—brooch. A showy design of two butterflies, outlined in tiny diamonds and colored stones, probably turquoise. It looked ridiculous on her, and she must have known it. I think she was wearing it *at* me!"

"She might have had some feeling against you on account of the accident—however unjust. Did she ever express it before last night?"

"Never once! We hadn't much in common except our interest in this house. Perhaps that is why we always got on well together. I only hope I was as considerate as she was. I feel mean, telling you about her behavior Thursday night, but I think it proves she was not her normal self."

But it didn't prove that she contemplated suicide, thought Curwen.

"We shall not know whether Mrs. Dacey killed herself," he asserted, "until we've found where that strychnine came from."

"You know already, Inspector. Obviously, it was she who took the missing five hundred grains from the laboratory."

"Have you any kind of proof?"

"When I have no proof, I fall back on common sense. She could not have got that strychnine except from the laboratory." She was slurring her words as if she were struggling with a sudden sleepiness. *"Heart failure!"* she exclaimed, wide-awake. "The vet told my husband our dog had died of heart failure—which has to be caused by something. Inspector, is it possible that the vet just said heart failure when he knew it was really strychnine?"

"I don't see why a vet should lie about it," hedged Curwen. "It's hardly my business. You'd better ask your husband."

Julia nodded and apologized.

"I see what's in your mind," added Curwen. "Maybe she had a morbid streak. I noticed that pet cemetery in the garden. Someone told me that all her pets had been—sort of murdered—that the parrot had been suffocated."

"Whatever next!" exclaimed Julia. "The parrot died of old age. The others—well, they just died—probably through overfeeding. If anything horrible had been done, I would remember."

Funny she should deny it, he thought—it would have helped her tale. Curwen felt that he was losing his grip on his witness. Her revelation concerning Doris Trallen's mother had distorted the whole grouping of facts. He would work back to Mrs. Millard through her husband.

But her husband distorted the grouping still further. Curwen's

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opening was based on the knowledge that the opinions of suspected persons are often more revealing than the facts in their possession.

"Mrs. Millard seems to think that deceased killed herself?"

"That's one way of putting it."

"Then put it the right way for me, Mr. Millard."

"She tried to poison my wife, muddled the chocolates, and killed herself by accident. She managed better when she poisoned her husband." Millard hurried on, "It can't matter to you what I think. You want facts. With my wife's help, I've spent the weekend making a log." He handed over a sheaf of typewritten sheets. "All my acts and movements and ditto of the other two as known to me. All correct to a minute or so. Footnotes give any explanations my wife and I thought necessary."

Curwen expressed approval, studied the log for a few minutes, then turned back to the first page.

"Thursday evening. 6:15 gave Maud chocolates . . . Later she opens the box and, still further on, puts it on the sideboard." Curwen paused. "I may as well tell you now that the local police found a box of Athene Chocolates on that sideboard, keeping step with your log. There were just two chocolates missing. I had the rest analyzed. Five chocolates, all up at one end, had been impregnated with strychnine. Can you tell us anything about that, Mr. Millard?"

"Only this—the box cannot have been the one I gave her at six fifteen. She couldn't have dolled herself up, doped the chocolates, and refixed the cellophane, all by 7 o'clock. She must have switched the boxes. Try that wastebasket—she threw the cellophane in there."

"You may be right. The cellophane *had* been cut and gummed together again. A box of the same chocolates—rubber-stamped on the cellophane from the Korner House—was found, intact, in her bedroom. All this, as you say, points to the boxes having been switched. But it doesn't tell us *who* switched the boxes and poisoned the chocolates!"

Millard thought it over. Curwen did not disturb him.

"She must have reasoned like this, Inspector," he said. "Julia was to swallow one of the doped chocolates and die in this room. She would say I had given her the chocolates and so I would be convicted. It would not have come off, of course, but she knew nothing at all about police methods. We shall never know what she actually did with those chocolates, so we can forget them."

Forget them! To Curwen it seemed an incredibly childish suggestion. Millard was actually going on to talk of something else.

"So I tell my chief," interrupted Curwen, "that we think deceased poisoned herself by accident—but we can't find out how!"

"I don't think I deserved that." Millard was offended. "If you will

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pay me the compliment of studying my log—which is checkable throughout—you will find that any one of the three of us could have performed all the monkey tricks of switching boxes and cellophane."

This time it was Millard who waited—still and silent until Curwen looked up from the log.

"You see for yourself, Inspector. The chocolates won't help until you've found out who pinched that five hundred grains of strychnine from the lab."

"We aren't allowed to use magic, you know."

"You would have been allowed to look for that strychnine in Maud Dacey's deed-box, lodged with a Safe Deposit company. It might have helped you when her husband was killed. I don't say it would have—I say it might have."

"We checked on all the Deposit companies. She had no deed-box on deposit at that time."

"That's where you're wrong, Inspector! I know positively that she had." Millard was making the most of it. "She deposited a deed-box before she married Dacey. With Empire Securities, Ltd. The account was in her former name of Trallen. Perhaps that is why you missed it?"

That was a knock for Curwen.

"Why didn't you tell me at the time?"

"Because I'd never heard of that deed-box until about a month ago. She asked me to bring it home for her. I did so."

Curwen went into the hall to telephone.

"I've sent one of our men to check your story with the Deposit company. I expect his report within an hour." Curwen resumed his seat. "You're putting up an idea, but it's a tough one. I can't see that old fuddy-duddy as the Maniac Killer."

"Maniac nothing! She had a sort of hangfire hate for the Daceys. For Mr. Dacey because he married her only out of compassion. She would have killed Julia in this room if I hadn't happened to pass the box and turn it around. Plan Number Two was to leave the box on the sideboard. Julia often accepted her chocolates, but I never did. And she believed that all she had to tell you was that the box was the same one I had given her, and everything would be lovely."

"And did she hate your little dog, too?"

"It's a safe bet—*now*—that she poisoned Chiang. If only because my wife was fond of him. Last night at dinner she worked the hate up to a sort of cold hysteria. She mentioned the accident—which she had never done before. And part of the general build-up was chatter about what the poor kid would be doing at that moment, if Julia hadn't killed her—pretty nearly in those words. She was nerving herself for the poison act. Blind chance and her own clumsiness gave her what she deserved."

Highlight on hate, again, thought Curwen. Both husband and wife

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were trying to put over a Maud Dacey who was more or less off her head. All very tenuous. Get back to the facts. Curwen started the routine questioning. The records give 43 questions about the chocolates, without useful result. At the end of an hour he was called to the telephone to hear the Yard's report.

"The company confirms your statement," he announced, beaming. "You've got something there!"

"But very little," replied Millard, gloomily. "Backing for a theory, but no direct evidence. Even Maud would not have been such a fool as to put that phial of strychnine back in the deed-box, knowing that I knew about her using the other name.

"As it is," he went on, "suspicion hangs over me and my wife. It's a million times worse for Julia. Those beastly papers dragging up the old accident—with an oily hint that it might not have been an accident, meaning she's a female Jekyll and Hyde. That sort of thing sticks to a person for life."

"Take it easy," laughed Curwen. "*We* haven't finished yet!"

"You *have* finished!" The words came in an audible whisper. "You've got all the evidence that's gettable. As you did when Arthur Dacey was killed. From your angle, it's the same murder over again. Everybody shoveling information at you but none of it is worth anything without that phial. Why, it must be small enough to be hidden under a single leaf in the garden—or in Hyde Park, for that matter!"

"Just so," agreed Curwen politely. "But we'll begin by looking in that deed-box—as soon as we've found it."

"What!" Millard sprang from his chair. "Wasn't it in her room? Didn't you find it when you searched the house on Friday? Did you search outside the house?"

"We've not been searching for a deed-box, but we'll start right away—we know she didn't return it to Deposit. There was a key on her dressing table we couldn't find a lock for."

"My God, Inspector, I'm trying to take it in! If she has hidden that deed-box, there can be no other reason than—the phial of strychnine! She hid it there once, and she was much too one-track to think of hiding the tiny bottle without also hiding the big tin box. She's probably put it in the cloakroom at the local railway station. No, she might have been seen carrying it. She's buried it in the garden—that's it! The pets' graveyard was her special spot. Let's see if the earth has been turned—"

"What about leaving the details to us?" suggested Curwen, with some emphasis. "Thank you for your co-operation, Mr. Millard."

Unaided by Millard, Curwen's men found Maud Dacey's deed-box, within twenty minutes, but not in the pets' cemetery. They began in the garage, climbed by iron rungs to the disused upper part that had once

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been the groom's quarters before the stables had been converted. The deed-box was under crumbling floorboards, which had been clumsily replaced. On top of the deed-box was a coil of thick cord. The iron rungs were broad and could easily have been negotiated by a middle-aged woman provided she were unencumbered by a skirt. The box could have been hauled up afterwards by the cord.

The Millards were unaware that a search had been begun. On leaving Curwen, Millard had rushed upstairs like a schoolboy bursting with news. Indeed, Julia saw him as a schoolboy, excited about a missing deed-box. A clue, no doubt, to something or other. For her, now, there could be only one clue.

"You're barely listening, Julie. What's on your mind?"

"Chiang!" she answered, and instantly the schoolboy in him looked ashamed. "Did he die of strychnine poisoning, Will? Did you know it at the time? Was that why you wouldn't let me go into the sitting room and see him?"

"Oh, damn Curwen!" groaned Millard. "Yes—that is, I could see that he had died violently."

Chiang had died of strychnine! She had dreamed, long before the dog had come into their home, that she had stolen strychnine from the laboratory and hidden it—in order to kill.

"I am sorry I lied to you, Julia. But I believed I had to."

He believed he had to. Her fear of herself was multiplied—the dormant fear that had been fanned by the innuendoes in the newspaper, circling round the old river accident.

"It doesn't matter about the lie part of it. I told you the dreams had stopped after we married. They hadn't."

"I know. You talked in your sleep sometimes. I wanted to help you."

What else about herself had she kept from him?

"I dreamed that I killed Chiang. How do you know I didn't?"

"Darling, that's a very silly question!"

"How do you know I didn't kill Father? And Maud? Or do you know that I *did?*"

The schoolboy likeness had now completely vanished. She saw an anxious man—driven into a corner, and afraid.

"All right! I'll take it seriously. I can no more prove your innocence than can the police. I just know you are innocent because you are my wife. Recurrent nightmares are common. But a man could not have a schizophrenic wife and not be aware of it."

He was stating his faith in her, but faith had become meaningless.

"Will! Don't you see what you're proving?" She would not let him out of the corner into which she had forced him. "If you knew I had not killed Chiang, you must have believed that Maud did! Let me finish. That means you must have had at

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least a suspicion that she killed Father. Why did you let us come and live with such a woman? She might have killed me, or you, or both of us."

"As a matter of fact, that's what she tried to do. Only—"

"But why did you let us come here? It was an incredible thing to do. But it suddenly becomes a reasonable thing to do if you—if *you* killed Chiang and—"

She broke off. He no longer looked anxious. His face seemed to radiate a vast relief.

"Now, that's a perfectly sensible thing to say!" It was almost as if the suggestion had pleased him. "As Curwen amiably pointed out, I *could* have killed poor little Chiang by forcing the stuff down his throat while you were upstairs. There were money motives for murdering your father—Maud, too, for that matter. In both cases, you get more money which you share with me. It's one of the three lines the police have been working up. Your guilt, my guilt, Maud's guilt—with the tailpiece that she killed herself by accident."

"But you *didn't*, Will?"

"Never mind! We shall have a hell of a strain, waiting for them to find that deed-box. You must keep your head. If you get chattering to Curwen about those dreams, heaven knows what might happen! You don't really feel you have done all this awful killing. You've argued yourself into believing that you *might* have. They're rotten arguments. The arguments pointing to me are ever so much stronger. So let's cut out all argument and trust the police. Don't tell them one single thing you don't have to tell them. And now I'm going to make some tea, if I can find that electric kettle."

Before the tea was ready, a Yard man knocked at the door.

"Inspector wants you both to come down, please."

The deed-box was on the table in the dining room. One of Curwen's men was dusting it, making a little cloud of white powder; another was adjusting a camera.

"We found this box on the upper floor of your garage," announced Curwen and added, with a grin, "with your permission, we propose to open it in your presence."

With the key from Maud's dressing table he unlocked the box. He raised the lid, glanced inside, and immediately lowered it. He took, from his own bag, a pair of forceps and a flat tin box about a foot square. With the former he lifted from the deed-box a small metal syringe.

"This was used for inserting the poison into the chocolates. It hasn't been wiped." He was speaking to the Millards. "Has either of you seen this before?"

"I don't remember seeing it," said Julia.

"Then you should say you have not seen it before," corrected Millard. "Nor have I, Inspector."

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"The next object," said Curwen, forceps in hand, "is a phial. Maybe it's what we've all been looking for." He placed it on the table. "But we don't know yet." He opened his own flat tin box, which contained test tubes and a large number of tiny bottles. "I don't often have to do this job—and chemistry isn't my strong suit—so perhaps you'll be kind enough to check what I'm doing, Mrs. Millard."

"Let me hold the tube," offered Julia. "You put the substance in first, then add the reagent . . . Yes, that's strychnine."

"It's our lucky day, Julia!" cried Millard. "Perhaps Inspector Curwen will excuse you now?"

"I'd be obliged if Mrs. Millard would wait," objected Curwen. "At the moment, this box—for all we know in point of evidence—might be yours, or Mrs. Millard's. We'll have to identify it by the contents."

He took out the framed photographs of the child.

"Mrs. Millard?"

"I've never seen the photos before." Her voice was unsteady. "This child might be Doris Trallen. But I cannot say positively."

"I don't think you'll be able to get an identification from us," put in Millard. "That box was locked away before any of us knew Mrs. Dacey."

"We'll have to run through it, all the same," muttered Curwen. He took out a small jeweler's case and pressed the catch.

"What about this?"

In the case was a brooch—a showy design of two butterflies in diamond points and turquoise.

"Oh, yes!" cried Julia. "That's the brooch she was wearing at dinner—the one I told you about, Inspector. You agree, Will?"

"Could be, but I can't swear to it."

"It's good enough for an identification if you both agree," said Curwen. "Let's see, now." He produced the log which Millard had written. "It's in here, somewhere. Here! '7:05. Dinner. Incidents of dinner: Mrs. D., gaudy, unsuitable dress; brooch (child's), twin butterflies, diamonds, turquoise.' That's exactly what you wrote, Mr. Millard."

"Good enough," agreed Millard.

Curwen continued to read from the log. "'After dinner: Beethoven symphony; Mrs. D. inattentive and restless; 10:30, Mrs. D. goes to bed. Mrs. M. and self discuss her strange behavior. 10:40: scream from direction of Mrs. D.'s room.' Hm! At ten thirty she goes up to bed. She takes off the brooch, puts in this jeweler's case and locks it in the deed-box. Then she removes the gaudy dress—she was found in underthings. How long would all that take her, Mrs. Millard?"

"She couldn't have whipped that dress off," answered Julia, with a thought. "With one thing and another, I don't see how she could have done it all in less than five or six minutes."

"Brings us pretty close to ten forty, doesn't it? Leaves her only

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four or five minutes for the whole job of getting up those rungs—in an underskirt—and getting back to her room to eat the chocolate."

He looked at both of them.

"If Mrs. Dacey hid that deed-box, *she must have done it after she was dead*. You are both under arrest."

"No, we're not, Inspector!" snapped Millard. "Just go on reading. Try the ten forty-five entry."

"'Ten forty-five,'" quoted Curwen. "'Asked Mrs. M. to phone Dr. Blagrove that I would pick him up in my car.' What of it?"

"How can you ask!" Millard was elaborately patient. "If that deed-box was taken from that bedroom *after* Mrs. Dacey's death, it must have been taken while my wife was telephoning."

That gave Curwen what he wanted—for already he was sure there was only one guilty person.

"Your wife would have had time enough to hide that deed-box while you were fetching the doctor. Or you yourself could have taken it with you when you went to the garage for the car. Have it your own way, Mr. Millard. We're not required to prove which of you did what. You are jointly charged."

"Will!" cried Julia. "I can't bear this. Is he proving—?"

"Don't interrupt, dear! The Inspector is talking to me."

Curwen made no protest as Millard led his wife to the door, kissed her, then shut her out of the room.

"Thanks, Curwen," he said, then nerved himself for the plunge. Julia's instant identification of the brooch had made any defense hopeless.

"While she was telephoning, I took the deed-box down the backstairs and put it under the boards, which I'd fixed beforehand. I killed Arthur Dacey and Maud—and I killed the Peke to lay a trail against Maud. I'm not even warning my wife not to talk to you without a lawyer—the more she talks the better you'll know she had nothing to do with it from start to finish."

Which still leaves some doubt whether Millard could be typed as The Matrimonial Adventurer.

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